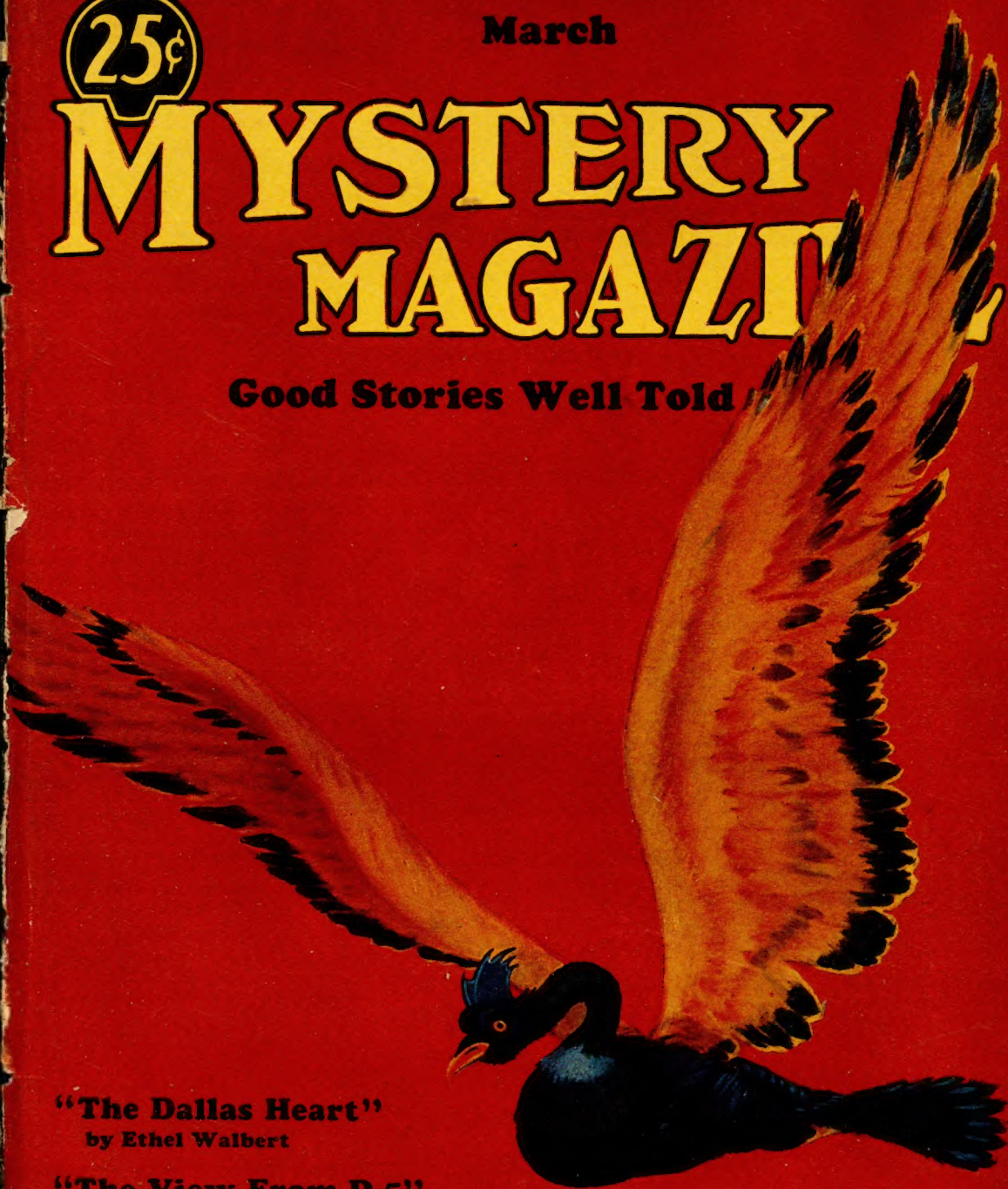


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March

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ROBERT SIMPSON, EDITOR

Volume X

Number 6

CONTENTS

COVER DESIGN.....	FRED. T. EVERETT
AROUND THE CORNER.....	THE EDITOR 642
THE VIEW FROM D-5.....	RICHARD WILMER ROWAN 643
<i>Complete Novelette</i>	
ABOARD THE MILLICENT.....	SINCLAIR GLUCK 662
<i>A Short Story</i>	
THE DALLAS HEART.....	ETHEL WALBERT 670
<i>A Three-Part Story—Part I</i>	
THE PERFECT ALIBI.....	IRVING BRANT 695
<i>A Short Story</i>	
NOTHING EVER HAPPENS TO ANGEL.....	EVADNE PRICE 702
<i>The first of a series of short stories</i>	
THE BIRD OF WISDOM.....	FRED. T. EVERETT 712
<i>The Legend of the Cover Design</i>	
DEAD MEN MAKE NO MUSIC.....	EDWINA LEVIN MACDONALD 713
<i>Five-Part Story—Part II</i>	
FOXFIRE.....	HAYNES TREBOR 740
<i>A Short Story</i>	
THE BROTHER OF SLEEP.....	EARLE DANESFORD 753
<i>A Short Story</i>	
CARDS AND SPADES.....	GILBERT RIDDELL 756
<i>A Short Story</i>	
THE PLIGHT OF JOHN McBRIDE.....	WILLIAM JAMES PRICE 768
<i>A Poem</i>	
MISCELLANEOUS	
DEATH IN THE POT.....	669
SPECTRE DOGS.....	752

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Around the Corner

COMING down to brass tacks is a comparatively simple matter in an all-fiction magazine. The story's the thing. And to make a magazine of this sort a good magazine, the fundamental necessity is that it shall print good stories. Simple enough.

On the surface, at least, almost anyone can tell the difference between a good story and a bad one. It is a good story if you like it; it's a bad one if you don't. Consequently it would appear that all an editor has to do is to select the stories he likes and reject those he doesn't like.

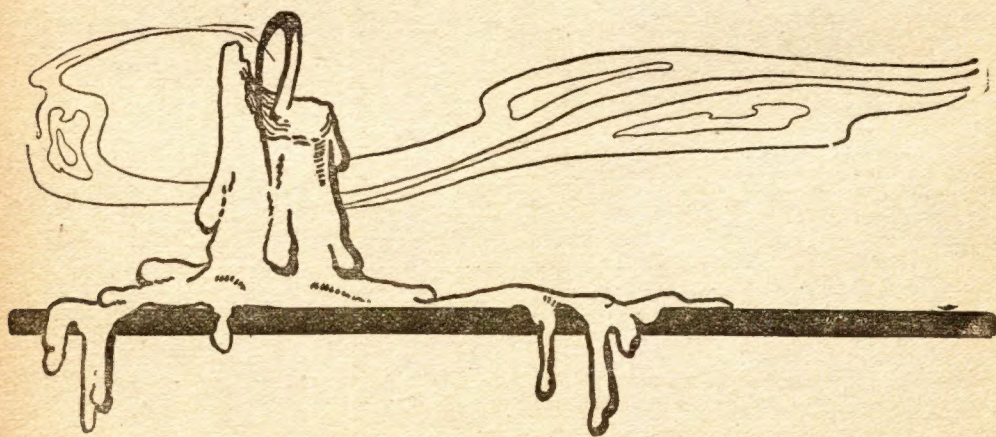
However, the constituents of a really good story are not quite so easily defined as our old friend the constant reader may suspect. Prize-winning novels and short stories, for instance, are frequently a source of profound amazement and disappointment to a great many earnest and approximately fair-minded folks who read them; and anyone who knows anything about publishing knows that the best-selling novel of any season is just as heartily condemned as it is enthusiastically endorsed.

Therefore, it is pertinent to ask—what is a really good story?

The pages of MYSTERY MAGAZINE are trying to answer this question each and every month as emphatically as the editors' judgment and luck will permit.

But in case this kind of answer isn't specific enough to satisfy some of our more exacting readers, we shall try to be more definite in this space next month.

THE EDITOR.





The View From D-5

By RICHARD WILMER ROWAN

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

In this story Richard Wilmer Rowan sends up a magnificent toy balloon of expectancy — and at the appointed time it bursts and showers a fusillade of brilliance and vividness before the eyes of the assembled spectators. Then, suddenly, THE VIEW FROM D-5 shifts from the ordinary dashing and sparkling Parisian revue to the most blazing and spectacular performance ever vouchsafed a metropolitan first-night audience.

CHAPTER I.

AT EASE

THERE was no elevator in the dingy little building, and as she climbed steep stairs that were dark and very creaky Agnes wondered how many who came here preferred it so and would rather be heard than seen.

Not so long ago she had felt like that herself but now, with conscience clear, her errand was mainly in be-

half of another, her anxiety quickened by affection.

And so she approached the office, troubled and hopeful and eager, yet paused before that door which always had awed her, for his name was lettered in black and gold upon it:

DE WITT WICKFORD

Only his name! But then, what portal ever expansive enough to allow the listing of all his vocations, his

hobbies and helpful endeavors and confidential interests?

Or how denote his shrewd services to that manifold company, the scores he had aided, who acclaimed him their best friend and the most dependable, the most unprecedented and accomplished criminal attorney in North America?

Agnes, pausing, surveyed herself. Surely he'd approve the neat blue serge suit, the white blouse of becoming simplicity.

The mirror set in her handbag disclosed cosmetics properly subdued; and while her small hat had been found on Broadway, Fifth Avenue offered many akin to it.

No use pretending she didn't care for gay colors. He would never be deceived.

INTO the Wickford office she went, to encounter that familiar barrier—a young girl who sat before a table piled with newspapers, shears poised and wire trays ready for the press cuttings to be made according to colored pencil marks on the pages she turned.

Agnes knew her and nodded.

"You're Miss Corey," said the girl. "He expects you. Miss Walsh is taking dictation, but she'll be right out."

Agnes smiled to signify she didn't object to delay; but she waited uneasily, avoiding the chairs and contriving to examine in turn each of the nine pictures framed upon the walls of the outer office.

But soon Miss Welsh, the lawyer's secretary, came from the private office. She was a smart and attractive young woman who greeted Agnes warmly and said Mr. Wickford would see her at once. Whereupon Agnes entered the sanctum she had reason to revere, and the door was shut behind her.

THOUGH the building was old and shabby and in no way up-to-date, De Witt Wickford's private room within it might have belonged to a suite of a modern palatial hotels; if that room were unlike every other private office in the city, Wickford's uncommonly blended pursuits excused any peculiarity of scene.

Hidden away in the bookcases and files which lined its walls were a thousand-and-one objects offering proof of the manifold specialties of the man who welcomed Agnes Corey.

He motioned her to a rocking-chair, of which there were two, luxuriously upholstered. And they would perhaps have seemed the most eccentric thing about his office, except that it had no windows.

"You are nervous," was his salutation. "Sit and rock for a while. Nothing like rocking to relieve the nerves. That is why I keep these chairs for clients, you know."

"I didn't know. But I often wondered," said Agnes, obediently rocking.

"A cigarette?" he offered. "Or whistle, if you like—it's also very soothing."

But Agnes accepted the cigarette; and he purposely turned away while she lighted it for herself. She was not the sort to be put at ease by attentions emphasizing his polite superiority.

LONG ago a witty colleague had called Wickford a mental chameleon, able at will to assume the protective coloration of the commonplace.

In his criminal practice he dealt in the main with persons who were afraid, furtive, evasive, untruthful, often constitutionally dishonest.

His success might depend on his persuading them to talk; and it was his gift to induce dependable statements of fact from many addicted to falsehood by a display of traits at

once comforting, companionable and ordinary.

It was said of De Witt Wickford that in this very office he had helped a notorious gangster to approach veracity by chewing a liberal cut of tobacco and spitting on his own cherished Kermanshah rug—an extreme instance, obviously, outmoded and pre-war.

About forty the lawyer was, of medium height, with a round, cheerful face smooth shaven, and a thick gray pompadour. He helped Agnes Corey toward composure by placidly ignoring her.

He stood before a dark blue curtain which might have concealed a door but did not, and he examined the assorted memoranda pinned upon it—pink, white, blue and yellow slips, cards, envelopes, letterheads and fragments clipped from newspapers and magazines.

Here, by means of the curtain, everything currently vital to his interests was kept "on top." He had no desk, but instead used a large walnut table, and he used it as if resolved to counteract the convenience of the note-studded curtain.

Its ample space accommodated his hat and stick and gloves, a box of cigars and another of choice cigarettes, but also a cracker jar of antique appearance, a huge inkwell whose base was the foot of an elephant, a metal tray containing knives and pistols and other durable exhibits from many a celebrated trial.

"And now, how are you, Agnes Corey?" said he, turning to the girl whose smile for him mingled timidity with hero worship. "Tell me about yourself. How is Jim?"

NEITHER a modest man nor mouse-like, De Witt Wickford never permitted himself to strut, and he kept his tone of inquiry as subdued as his blue suit or ultramarine tie.

"Jim's all right," Agnes responded, "though it's about him I come—came to see you, sir."

"He is going straight, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's trying to, Mr. Wickford."

"Do you mean—trying and failing?"

"No, sir—Jim is trying and he'll make good, if they'll just only leave him alone. He knows too many of the wrong sort. I love him, you know that—but I can see his faults. There's still a lot of gangster in my Jim."

"I hardly expected him to fail through bad influence or companionship, when he has you."

"But I can't be with him all the time. He'd grow to hate me—you know, apron strings. Besides, when I'm ushering six evenings and two matinees——"

"You like it at the Carlton?" he interrupted.

"Oh, yes, very much. The hours and pay are good enough. I enjoy seeing the people, and I don't get tired of it being the same show every day, as I expected I would," Agnes explained.

Wickford nodded, allowing her to unfold the cause of her agitation in any indirect way she chose.

"You know, of course, I never really enjoyed shoplifting. I was weak, just like you said in court," said she. "But your getting my sentence suspended was a miracle, and then being my reference and finding me the theatre job, too——"

"I was sure you'd do better at the Carlton. The temptations there must be of altogether a different variety."

"They never touched me, sir. I find umbrellas and I turn 'em in. I found a mink scarf and didn't keep it."

"Splendid! I am proud of you."

"But now, Mr. Wickford, there's some trouble stirring," Agnes exclaimed. "Jim has been wanting me to quit ushering. I said I wouldn't

leave any such good job till he proved he could be steady as an electrician. And then he seemed to get sore, and I got sore. He said when he worked all day and I at night, we'd practically never meet.

"Finally I got a big hunch. When I sprung it he was too full of surprise and admiration to try to lie.

"Mr. Wickford," she cried, "Jim's had a tip off about something crooked that's going to be pulled at the theatre. He wants that I should get away while the getting's good.

"He knows how the bulls—police—are, sir. Inside job, they love to yelp. They'll look up everybody working at the Carlton Theatre, and they'll find out about me and that I'm engaged to marry Jim Egan, who nearly got sent up for that Atwater robbery.

"And then, whatever it is, it'll seem as clear as plate glass to 'em. They'll pin the job on Jim and me."

De Witt Wickford had come over to stand beside her. He took her small hand, once so dangerously clever, and he held it firmly.

"The police never frame my clients," he declared, a trifle pompously. "You did the right thing, of course, hurrying here to me—I'm your insurance policy. And now, tell me every bit of this you know—or rather, that Jim knows."

"Not much, I'm afraid, sir. Jim is terrible afraid of seeming a squealer. I don't want that, either—he'd be bumped off, and no good done anywhere.

"Because I work at the Carlton and he so often stops there for me at night, a whisper has been slipped to him. Just enough to put him wise, I figure—and he'd be wild if he knew I was passing it on."

THERE were tears misting the pretty blue eyes, and the lawyer exerted himself to reassure her.

"Do I gallop down to headquarters

every time I pick up an underworld rumor?" he exclaimed. "Great heaven, girl, I try to prevent crime—not instigate a series of massacres. Police accomplishments are secondary with me.

"Looking out for youngsters such as you and Jim Egan, who need every break if you're going to pull upstream, that's the chief object of Pilot Wickford.

"It's clear enough. Some of Jim's former pals plan to rob the box office at the Carlton," he continued. "They know Jim hangs around waiting for you. They may have wanted him to join them, and when they couldn't get him to, probably warned him to keep away.

"Since the police would suspect him, and he knows their mob, his answers to questions might expose the crooks, no matter how much he refused to squeal. That's why they're afraid. They want you and Jim both to stay away."

"Jim has so far given me only one direct hint, Mr. Wickford," said Agnes. "You know, 'The Pepper Rose' is closing, and whatever will happen is coming after the new show opens—a week from Thursday, that French revue—"

"With Audry Zenova and her husband and Le Clerc? Of course—a big sensation! Twenty-five dollars a seat for the opening night—and the house already oversubscribed."

"It's bound to be a big hit, everybody says so."

"Then the agencies and specs will have every ticket for weeks," said the lawyer. "Except for the few hundred dollars from standing room, there'll be nothing in the treasurer's safe at the Carlton to make it worth cracking."

"Why, yes—that's so. Oh, I am glad I came and talked to you, sir." Agnes was gratefully relieved. "Jim's

mistaken. He's heard some hophead talking——"

"For Jim's sake I want to find out what the hophead thought he knew," Wickford said. "I haven't seen 'The Pepper Rose.' And you say it is closing?"

"I'll drop in tomorrow night. Say nothing to Jim, mind—but after the show I'll round up you two ex-clients and we'll go somewhere for a little reunion supper."

"You sit tight, and Jim will talk to me about what's worrying him, not in so many words, perhaps—but in his appetite or maybe just his playing with bread crumbs. Jim's not sly, not a bit. He'll help us help him."

HER explosive gratitude finally checked, he escorted her to the outer office in his kindly way and sent her forth to subsist upon the cheering belief that a Carlton Theatre robbery would be absurd and fruitless. But when he returned to his private room Miss Welsh went with him.

"Tell me all you know of this Parisian revue opening at the Carlton next week," said he.

"Only that it's going to be smart and expensive," the secretary answered. "It was a sensation on the Continent, I read, and too sensational for London. The Lord Chamberlain admired Audry Zenova's celebrated jewels, but declined to permit her to wear them in place of clothing."

"New York isn't expected to be so fastidious? Well, please call up Markham and say I want a seat for the Carlton première—second, third or fourth row."

Miss Welsh did not hesitate to smile.

"You do me an injustice, but such is the fate of a public character," Wickford chuckled. "I'll even pay a top price for my ticket, but you needn't tell Markham that till he makes you."

"And also, the Carlton must have a publicity man who will talk about Zenova and her troupe of imported marvels. Please get him on the phone. I'll find some excuse for my inquiry."

From time to time as he thoughtfully paced the room up and down he stopped to nourish himself, taking from the cracker jar on the littered table no crackers, but potato chips, crisp and brown, which it was his whim to relish at all hours.

It appeared that he was not dismissing Jim Egan's threatful uneasiness about the Carlton as casually as he had persuaded Agnes to do. And when his telephone buzzer signaled the call put through, he answered eagerly.

CHAPTER II

CHANGING LIGHTS

 HE lawyer who would appear insignificant and even vulgar so that criminals or those suspected of crime might overcome an habitual tendency to deny acquaintance with the truth, the genial and plainly dressed friend in whom Agnes Corey and Jim Egan confided, could not be seen at the celebrated opening performance of the "Revue de la Rue de la Paix" at the Carlton Theatre.

But a very resplendent De Witt Wickford attended and was, in fact, the third person seated in the orchestra, his seat being D-5.

Fourth row, third from the aisle, left—an excellent place for the occasion it was, and despite a not inconsiderable influence among speculative gentry it had cost him forty-eight dollars.

Being on duty in the balcony, Agnes Corey achieved no early glimpse of the Wickford elegance. From opera hat to patent boots the lawyer was immaculate; and as the audience predestined to be called

"brilliant" assembled around him, his full evening dress became conspicuously correct among the prevailing dinner coats and black ties.

But his splendors were strictly sartorial—the cut of his clothes, the manner of his wearing them; unlike his neighbors, he did not glitter.

He seemed without jewelry. But all around him were shining fortunes, female and male garnished exorbitantly—ostentatious and unashamed.

Many of the women appeared to have expressly adorned themselves with gems to meet the impending competition, for it had been widely advertised that the Manhattan climate would permit Audry Zenova to wear more than half of her fabulous collection.

And Wickford, if attired as a gentleman, did not resist staring about him like any yokel. He even wrote brief notes in a small lizard-bound book, setting down names of persons arriving whom he recognized. Not a few of these recognized him, and many bowed.

Yet the ornate lady on his right with the handsome throat and shoulders and the appropriate strands of pearls was wondering why a society reporter had so prominent a seat, what paper he represented—and did he know her by name?

"Didn't know you were a first-nighter," said one, leaning over from the aisle seat in the row directly back of the lawyer—one who knew him well and honored him as a master of his calling, the tall and angular Raines Spencer. He had once been a noted police reporter, but now he wrote witty and often authentic reviews of the theatre.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine—and you?" said Wickford.

"Fine."

"I still read your stuff. The stage is an old favorite of mine. But this

is my first 'first-night' in years."

"Friends down at Headquarters warn you to see it soon, before anything had to be officially banned?" the critic chuckled.

"No—and I see none of them here," said Wickford, "adjusting their shock absorbers."

"Guess this show isn't expected to need that kind of publicity boost. We shall see what we shall see."

AT 8:47 the house lights dimmed and the curtain rose, revealing a special interior curtain of shimmering green and silver.

The orchestra concluded its overture.

No footlights were in use, but a blue flood-light cast upon the sparkling fabric of the curtain produced an effect of cascading diamonds and moonlit space of ethereal grandeur—to the initiate, good showmanship and artistic intent at relatively small expense.

The orchestra passed from overture to dance. And now a white spotlight cut its radiant circle upon the blue of the gorgeous curtain which slowly and gracefully parted to reveal upstage a deeper blue akin to fog.

Whirled as if by a playful wind, frail draperies clouding about them, four young dancers came suddenly into the beaming path of the spotlight.

Then, as suddenly, they separated—swept almost into the faces of the audience, but checked in their capricious course, it seemed, by some giant eddy of tone rising from the orchestra.

It was driving the four of them round and round, merging them, thrusting them into the brilliant white again; but then they escaped, off and away in buoyant flight, dazzling, harmonious, into the foggy depth of blue and obliteration.

The Revue had begun!

RESPONDING with the heartiest applause, the superb audience forgot its importance, wealth and ornamentation.

Wickford joined in the din and noted with further approval that when the dancers reappeared to bow and bow again, the lighting did not change, the illusion was not lost.

Presently a very small blonde came out in a very diminutive costume and began to sing an American song with a method distinctively Parisian.

The backdrop was orange and the lights full; eight chorus girls assisted with the refrain and following dance.

And the audience was so stirred by the beauty of it that it proved loudly receptive to a number which might have been borrowed from almost any musical show on Broadway.

Next, twelve tall bearded Russians in Cossack uniforms presented themselves for this unreserved acclaim. But they were equipped to earn it.

On the full stage, while six stood aside and sang with a fine, racy harmony, the other half dozen performed a series of amazingly acrobatic dances for which could be forgiven their want of grace.

The singers hummed a marching tune and red boots flashed over the stage, but seldom touched it.

And in conclusion the agile group turned frankly gymnast; the act was a muscular and musical hit, the encores well deserved and many.

Despite his front seat and the absence of feminine allure De Witt Wickford used opera glasses to study each of the stalwart performers of this Slavic troupe.

AND NOW before a black velvet drop the great and comic Le Clerc himself appeared to receive generously welcoming volleys of applause.

He dared to wear the most ordinary white clown costume and make up, and led an intensely bored little

mongrel by a leash that had been a pair of red suspenders and retained much of the original elasticity.

In pantomime Le Clerc was a genius. His fun was rather more subtle than the clown apparel had promised.

Tricks that the little dog refused to undertake he sadly performed himself, obviously illustrating his project, entirely unaware of the chuckling audience, while intent upon shaming the canine delinquent by diligent example. But in vain——

The mongrel yawned and was then attached to a chair and seemed not to notice the rebuke.

Turning to inanimate objects, Le Clerc began to juggle—a feather, a broom, a toy balloon—a lamp, a sword, a cigarette, candy, a small drum, an egg. Until at last it seemed only the dog, the chair and himself were not among the articles flying through the air as he attained a crescendo of dexterity.

In conclusion he concerned himself with a number of tiny balls and sticks which he brought downstage as close to the spectators as the footlights allowed. They formed a veritable pattern as they spun between his skillful hands.

Behind him a new drop appeared, silently shutting off the stage which must be set for the sensational, be-gemmed Zenova.

Her American début! Anticipation rustled through the packed house.

And to Wickford, studying Le Clerc through his glasses, it seemed that this veteran continental artist was singularly disturbed by the relaxing of attention.

Any clever and experienced performer can make less than his best a substitute for masterly exhibition. Le Clerc appeared to be distracted, to be listening.

He was not working the harder as a good showman will, trying to hold

his audience. He was persistently trying a nearly impossible feat and botching it—trying to juggle a small pistol and six cartridges, his major object being to break the weapon at intervals and catch a falling cartridge in an empty chamber of the exposed cylinder.

Repeated failure, dropping of cartridges, created no desirable suspense. Spectators in the front rows became nervous and showed it.

A fancied explosion was attached to each mistake—a sad anticlimax to an otherwise gifted and engaging performance.

A SHRILL whistle sounded in the theatre.

Le Clerc dropped not only three cartridges but the revolver also, and was stopping anxiously to gather them up when the whistle was repeated with disagreeable vehemence.

Two men had detached themselves from the ranks of standees at the rear of the orchestra seats. They came swiftly down the left center aisle and mounted the three carpeted steps ascending to the stage.

"You! Leave the toy gun lie!"

It was a gruff and muffled command from the leader. And now it was seen by hundreds that the intruders wore black masks.

The smaller man, who had not spoken, wore a dinner coat and seemed faultlessly garbed. Both carried heavy automatic revolvers.

Here was Parisian novelty! Did it introduce Audry Zenova, or would Le Clerc proceed deftly to juggle the pair, their masks and threatening armament?

"Everybody on stage!"

The newcomers covered the musicians and their dismayed conductor. Other masked men with revolvers were now patrolling the outside aisles, intimidating ushers.

"Stage manager, put up the house lights! Raise that drop!"

He of the harsh and muffled voice was obeyed with that celerity which weapons of heavy calibre often induce.

But now, perhaps by virtue of the authority vested in his evening attire, the smaller sponsor of this confounding interlude stepped forward to address the audience.

De Witt Wickford's glasses were on him as he raised one slender hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen—attention, if you please!"

He spoke distinctly in spite of the mask which, like all the others in view, was virtually a hood that concealed him from his chin to the crown of his head; and he spoke slowly and precisely, seeming to control an accent.

"My friends and I are here as part of the show, but not by arrangement with the manager," he continued blandly.

"We hope to amuse you, but it is going to cost more. Yet, however costly, here is an episode you will remember all the rest of your lives."

A big man, a well known critic who was sitting on the aisle of the sixth row, stood up irritably and started to leave his seat.

"Sit down!"

Automatics repulsed this sortie.

"Yes, please—the house is full of ladies, and no one of you must risk starting a panic," said he of the faint accent. "For, you see, ladies and gentlemen, we are doing something which cannot be done. We must have you all here as responsible witnesses."

He paused sardonically and gestured with his revolver.

"And, if you please, let no one think we have been careless. We have rehearsed like other theatre artists.

"Every exit is guarded. Communications are temporarily cut off.

This theatre is isolated, and we are conducting the quarantine. Behind me the stage crew and company are being rounded up."

THIS was, in fact, occurring. Aghast and absurd in his clown dress, Le Clerc still stood at the right near the footlights.

In back of him the drop had been raised, disclosing the stage half set for Zenova's entrance and grimly dominated by two more masked robbers, each with a pair of revolvers.

Before the threat of these weapons, quietly, almost on tiptoe, stagehands and the revue company were assembled, many of the latter grotesquely unclad, caught in the midst of changing costume.

"There are some fourteen hundred of you in the house," the masked lecturer resumed, "and all dressed up for an extravagant event. This is it. Our spotters have watched you assemble here tonight. You are richly arrayed."

"No use trying to hide valuables," came from the gruff leader. "Unless you want to step up here as a committee and be searched. This is a million-dollar stick-up. It has to pay big, and there are twenty odd of us to see that it does."

Four robbers came down the aisles, each with a revolver and a black leather bag—ready to gather their loot.

"My associates will now pass among you," said the slightly accented voice. "We wish not to harm anybody. If you have a quick temper, control it for the sake of the majority. We are democratic. We mean to collect even from the last row in the balcony.

"Just sit quietly, if you please. Our impatience matches yours. Our program calls for all possible haste, of course. And when it is your turn, be prompt—be generous. For the re-

luctant ones are going to be searched, no matter how long it detains us."

FOURTEEN hundred patrons of the theatre sat in tense submission, silent and breathless, while the fantastic robbery proceeded.

Back and forth passed the black leather bags; into them poured bracelets, necklaces, watches, rings—little precious handfuls.

Now and again a woman sobbed in protest when some gem particularly valued was taken. But seldom did the masked collectors have to speak, their pistols imperatively exacting tribute.

De Witt Wickford in D-5 provoked the first complaint as to the value of an individual contribution.

"What's the idea? That watch and chain—and five bucks?"

The robber's derision rang through the house.

"For God's sake, don't start anything," urged a stout neighbor in E-7.

"Chief, he kicks in with only a bum ticker and a five-spot," the robber reported loudly. "Better strip him."

"Come up here! I warned you all——" Excited, the leader's accent was more marked. Wickford stood up and protested mildly.

"I gave all I have with me," said he. "That is a valuable and rare watch, regardless of the case."

"Wait! Let's see it," the gruff voice interrupted.

The questionable timepiece was passed up to the stage and examined. The two principal robbers conferred briefly.

"Give it back," said the surly one. "It's queer—no good to us."

WICKFORD, the watch restored to him, handled it gingerly as he sat down. He had kept his gloves on; and he put the watch in a leather case before returning it to his waistcoat pocket.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is foresight and not a favoritism," the more urbane leader was explaining.

"This gentleman, I am told, is an attorney who keeps people from going to jail. It is possible one day some of us may need his consideration."

In his chatty style he continued to address an audience grown visibly restive since Wickford's mild defiance.

"While the balcony is giving up," said he, "I think we'll have a second round down here. You men haven't done well by us. The ladies have been more bountiful. And you must have cuff links, waistcoat buttons, pearl studs and such trinkets about you."

"You see, we found very little cash in the box office. We stopped there first, of course. We could not afford to leave a telephone line uncut."

"And there was a fireman on duty who had to be tied up, as he might have felt entitled to behave like a policeman."

Leaning over amiably, he gave attention to the orchestra.

"You there——" he began.

"Shall we play?" the conductor queried anxiously.

"No. But you might hand me your diamond ring. And that violin—it's a Cremona, is it not?"

ORGANIZED and almost placid thievery was abruptly checked by a piercing shriek. Startled robbers poised alertly, each ready to shoot his way to the street in case of any interference.

Again the shriek! And tragedy stalked now in the crowded playhouse in which any spreading panic would result more terribly even than the gunfire of twenty desperate men.

But then came Audry Zenova, furious, challenging in shrill French, her costume a red cloak, which ex-

posed one fine shoulder, feet and legs bare, her hair tossed back and revealing the beautiful face distorted by rage.

Thus, the American début!

In hasty translation Wickford gathered that she refused to endure further detention in her dressing-room, refused to yield her famous jewels, refused in this vile, barbaric America to be mistaken for the ordinary victim of criminals.

"I couldn't shoot her—not her," the armed and apologetic robber who had followed the star from the wings proclaimed to his comrades.

"She wouldn't dress and come out here, like she was warned to. Her maid's fainted——"

"How do you know she's fainted? Get back there and stay on guard."

The two leaders turned upon the flaming Zenova.

"Stand over there and shut up!"

She defied them, sputtering abuse and baring more of the ivory shoulder.

The automatics swung up, devoid of pity as of admiration. Wickford noticed Le Clerc gesture pleadingly. Zenova would not cower, but she had to save her life.

Moaning, she gracefully flung out her arms, swayed, clutched in vain for support—and fainted. Members of her company were permitted to surround her. It was the end of melodrama.

For now the suave leader began to hurry his assistants, all collection having been suspended during the encounter with Zenova.

"The theatre across the street has its intermission at ten-fourteen," said he. "We must finish here before that. You can go faster up there in the balcony."

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said again, "you have helped the impossible to happen. We thank you for your quiet attention, your passive

generosity during this audacious experiment.

"Our success is all due to you, and as I leave I shall pinch myself, to be sure I'm not dreaming such kind co-operation."

"Get a cop to pinch you!" ventured a wag in the balcony. The bandit-captain waved up to him cordially.

At 10:10 he and his men were gone from the plundered Carlton. Nicely timed and ordered, their withdrawal in force had been executed with no less masterly precision than every other detail of the astounding raid.

"Sit still for five minutes! No stampede—no rush—no alarm!"

These, the leaders' parting injunctions, were observed by the awed throng.

"Lord, what a story!" exclaimed Raines Spencer, the critic who had been trained as a police reporter. He and Wickford at last had reached an exit together.

"I'd have bet everything they took from me that it was a press stunt—until that masked pirate tapped my ear with his young cannon."

CHAPTER III

TWO OF THE BEST

AT ELEVEN o'clock next morning a robust and red-faced man whose very arrogant expression appeared to be assumed for the occasion was telling the secretary, Miss Welsh, that he must see her employer immediately.

"Certainly, Inspector. I think Mr. Wickford is disengaged," she answered sweetly.

And, informed of his urgent caller, the lawyer hastily swept a batch of clippings from foreign papers into the table drawer and rose to welcome the police official.

"Inspector McGovern! Come in—glad to see you!"

"Now, I'll tell one," said the formidable chief detective.

"Why shouldn't I be glad to see you? Cigar?"

"No cigar. No potato chips. But I will sit on a straight chair. I only rock when I'm knitting my socks."

"Then you sit here and I'll rock."

"Maybe your nerves will need it, Wickford."

The lawyer chuckled and reached into the cracker jar for one crisp chip, consuming it derisively.

"Your own are on edge," he commented. "And no wonder, McGovern. Since about ten-thirty last night your men, working with an industry verging upon political terror, the affliction of mind communicated to them by their superiors——"

"Cut the comedy. I'm damned serious."

"But not courteous, Inspector. Too early in the day, perhaps? Anyway, let me remind you—you were only a first-grade detective when you began following leads I handed you. And now you're almost eminent. Even crooks respect you. Yet, oddly enough, you and I are not friends, it seems."

The inspector flushed, already on the defensive.

"Well, Wickford," he said, "how can anybody like me be your friend? I'm supposed to clean up the underworld. You want to get elected king of it—Big Chief Keeps-'em-out-of-jail."

"What rot! I have no use for the real underworld. All crime interests me, yes, and often I take the part of some poor devil who seems to me worth saving."

"You know my whole record, man. I wouldn't be worth a nickel today if it hadn't been for the mansions with capacious closets where the family skeletons hang."

"Often enough in suppressing a scandal I've antagonized the real

underworld kings. And do I ever defend drug peddlers, or the big grifters, the bootleggers and wire-pullers, the managers of con syndicates and crooked rings? Do I?

"Why, they all hate me. You'll only believe it when I'm picked out of an ashcan some night with a pound of lead in my back."

"Trying to make me cry?"

"No," said Wickford, "and I didn't mean to change the subject, as you possibly suspect. Since the Carlton hold-up, in which I figured curiously as a sort of exempted victim, your men have uncovered the following facts which concern me.

"I know Michaelson, who owns the theatre, and about eight months ago I secured a job as usher there for Agnes Corey, convicted shoplifter, for whom I had previously obtained a suspended sentence.

"It was Agnes' fate to be deeply in love with one James Egan, whose youth is now behind him, but still before you in the records down at headquarters.

"Jim was a gangster, and many of the mob he belonged to are now getting mail up the river, if at all.

"Jim loves Agnes. I'm having him taught to earn a living honestly. Nightly he has been calling at the Carlton Theatre to take Agnes home after the show.

"And so, say your dicks, Jim and Agnes make the Carlton stick-up an open-and-shut case. I congratulate you."

"Going to comedies and such has made you even funnier than usual," McGovern retorted. "My men happen to have gone a whole lot further than that, Wickford.

"They know that Jim Egan didn't call for Agnes last night—first time he has missed in weeks. They know you saw 'The Pepper Rose' last week. Chick Garner, the press agent, passed you in.

"But last night you bought your seat, paying forty or fifty dollars. And, in spite of the splurge, you only had on you a bum watch and a five-spot to give the bandits a laugh."

"But I seldom carry much cash, and I only needed my own taxi fare. As for the watch, it has a patent case that looks cheap——"

"And though you boasted it's valuable and rare——"

"My exact words, I believe," said the lawyer.

"But the crooks gave it back to you with a flourish."

"All of which dark suspicion proves what?"

"That you were tipped off, Wickford. Your interest in crime took you to the Carlton to see the hold-up attempted. A great show, worth the price, eh? You're practically an accessory before the fact. It'll mean disbarment, unless——"

"Unless what, my dear Inspector?"

"Unless you come clean with all you know."

"Have you years to devote to just listening?"

"Comic again. Well, I've time to devote to making you talk, Wickford.

"Even supposing you had no tip and it was all sweet coincidence—you sat in the fourth row last night and watched a big mob pull off the smoothest raid on record in this country. You must have a heap of smart notions about those birds.

"Let's hear 'em, and maybe the accessory thing can be forgotten."

"INSPECTOR," said the lawyer, "it's only fair to warn you that at midnight I was retained by Michaelson, owner of the Carlton, to represent him in this case. Anything you say may be given to the papers to use against you."

"Then it's war? You said we couldn't be friends."

"How about Agnes Corey and Jim Egan?"

"Small fry! If you'll talk, I won't care if Egan and his sweetie start writing for the tabloids."

"Why, then it's cooperation you really require, McGovern? And I thought a moment ago you were threatening to have me disbarred?"

"I guess you sort of got my goat with your kidding."

"Then it is not war, and you agree to tell your men to lay off of Egan and the girl," said Wickford.

"Also, I suggest immediate withdrawal of whatever obvious police guard you've thrown around the Carlton. Note, I said *obvious* guard. Let anybody enter, but watch who-ever leaves."

"Also, please cable London," he added. "Try to learn all the reasons why Audry Zenova and her company weren't permitted to perform. Scotland Yard may have shared in the Lord Chamberlain's ban."

He opened the table drawer to consult one of his foreign press cuttings.

"Inspector, query the Surete in Paris, please. Ask for a reply immediately on last known whereabouts of Charles Auguste Donnau, alias Louis Bonnat, alias Louis Murrac. And, finally, be ready to join me with a rush when I call you."

Though his face was still red, the inspector smiled cheerfully as he shook hands in parting.

"Of course we're friends, two of the best," said he. "But say, Wickford, you'll do nothing till you phone me?"

"I'll do a great deal."

"I meant, nothing final—no round-up, leaving the department holding the bag. I'm following your lead now——"

"Then dust out some cells. I'll tell you how to fill 'em. And I promise to make no arrests without notifying the police."

"I'll laugh at that one. But don't waste the mind of a great detective making up wise cracks," the inspector begged, adding, "I'll get off these cables right away."

"You'll have answers by three," said Wickford. "I'll telephone you. Be ready with your men."

CHAPTER IV

COURAGE AND CHARM



WO o'clock found the lawyer calling at that fashionable apartment hotel, near the Park, in which Audrey Zenova had taken up residence for an indeterminate sojourn in New York.

Here, since midnight, a restless horde of newspapermen had waited in the lobby, since an interview with the French star in regard to her presumably enormous losses was the goal of every city editor in town.

But Serge Zenoff, her husband, referred all inquiries to Andrew Michaelson at the theatre.

It was Michaelson who had arranged Wickford's early appointment. Zenova, so it was said, had returned to her apartment in a state of collapse, and must receive no one. Michaelson and his attorney were expected, however; and then Wickford's hint to the manager caused that ever harassed man to find detentions elsewhere.

Avoiding the reporters by using a service elevator, Wickford went up to the twelfth floor unannounced. A waiter admitted him to the suite of Zenova.

The star and her consort appeared to have consumed a wholly convalescent luncheon, to judge by the tray with which the waiter was about to make a labored exit.

Zenoff came out to greet the caller. He said Andrew Michaelson had telephoned about his detention, and he did not conceal his distaste for any

representative of the legal profession.

"Zenova!" he announced, and allowed Wickford to precede him into the next room, an act which seemed rather more distrustful than polite, as if he sought to avoid close inspection.

De Witt Wickford, however, had already observed this Serge Zenoff as an ordinary Latin type. If even one of his parents had been Russian, years of living in France or Italy had effaced incipient Slav characteristics.

EXQUISITELY French, Audry Zenova reclined upon a divan spread with cloth-of-gold, her slender form tightly wrapped in a garment of flame-colored chiffon velvet.

If this, thought Wickford, was a temperamental woman suffering from shock and irreparable loss, he must try to see more foreign artists in their moments of despair.

She languidly held out her hand, and he kissed it with a gallant flourish and a well-prepared compliment.

A swarthy, slim, immaculate young man who had been sitting by a window and near the gorgeous divan rose and bowed.

"My secretary, Monsieur Capelli," said Zenova. "Monsieur Weeckforrd."

Capelli had neither hat nor stick, but he wore gloves. He bowed again and withdrew from the room. The gloves did not perfectly conceal that the palms of both his hands were bandaged.

"You are a lawyer, so said my good Andrew Michaelson. Is it that you wish to talk to me about my great robbery?"

Zenova's accent was as cultivated and charming as her complexion. It appeared that she could speak English as well as she chose. Zenoff commanded the language fluently, but was not disposed to prove it.

"Yes—the robbery," said Wickford.

"Madame, I am a criminal lawyer——"

"Criminal?"

Zenoff's blunt exclamation made his wife's fine eyes flash.

"A lawyer who specializes in criminal cases. I am also undertaking to write an encyclopædia of crime. And as you, Madame, were the principal in this remarkable robbery——"

"You write, then, a history of crimes?" she queried. "From the beginning?"

"From Cain and Abel."

"Why not from Eve, the serpent and apple in Eden?"

"That is not crime, but theology."

She laughed, offered a chair close beside her, a cigarette—and gestured the frowning Zenoff into the background.

"I must congratulate you upon your superb fortitude, Madame," said Wickford, seating himself as directed. "Your magnificent collection of jewels, and now to lose them all!"

"All," she agreed. "Many are insured, but few can be replaced—duplicated. What is money when a connoisseur's collection has been snatched away? But as you say, Monsieur Weeckforrd—I am brave. I smile. *Vogue la galère.*"

"The insurance is, of course, fortunate. European company, I suppose? If I can aid you in securing payment——"

"They will pay promptly," said Zenoff.

"I do not care," Zenova assured them both, repeating the phrase, twisting her lithe body to fling the words at her sullen spouse. "I do not care. Let us no more discuss it. My revue," she questioned, "Monsieur, will this—this dreadful *première* hurt the success of it in your America?"

Wickford observed that if, as the papers estimated, nearly two millions

had been plundered at the Carlton, more than that huge amount was already accruing to the revue in front-page stories of the unparalleled hold-up.

"Featured by the press of two continents, as your publicity genius would say," he concluded. "You should tour for years, Madame. What we were permitted to see last night before the event was received as uncommonly good entertainment. That Russian troupe you have, for example. I liked them."

"They are clever, yes," said she.

"We hardly know them ourselves," Zenoff put in. "Russian refugees swarm over all of Europe. Some have talent."

"Our agent in Paris," said Zenova, "she hire us the Russians, at sailing time almost. They had to replace an Arab troupe of acrobats who missed the Marseilles boat."

"You have an excellent agent, then."

"A woman, too," Zenova proclaimed. "She is almost the American, our Clementine Donnau. As you say, a speeder."

"Hustler," he corrected. "Donnau? I seem to have heard of her—I have a large theatrical acquaintance."

"Yes?" said Zenoff.

DONNAU alias Bonnat alias Murrac! And Capelli with the bandaged palms!

Wickford, eager to run to the nearest telephone booth, fought to subdue his sudden excitement and so commented warmly upon the talents of Le Clerc.

Zenova and her husband said Le Clerc must return to a Parisian engagement after ten weeks. Zenoff observed rather curtly that they expected to replace him.

Affecting to recall the chief objective of his visit, the lawyer questioned each as to personal reactions just be-

fore, during and directly after the sensational Carlton raid.

And it was Zenova, of course, who supplied him the elaborate emotional account of herself up to the very moment of fainting at the muzzle of the chief robber's automatic pistol. Wickford took notes floridly, building up his alleged encyclopædia with zestful gratitude.

In conclusion, with profuse thanks, he begged to offer them supper at his apartment, any evening after the performance and as soon as madame had altogether recovered from the shock.

He mentioned certain vintages of champagne of which he still treasured a noble remnant. Whereupon Zenoff even seemed to find him worth an approving nod; and Zenova exclaimed that her art required that her recovery be immediate:

"I can withstand the one big shock," she said. "Why not? Have I not been shocking to so many always?"

"Dear Madame," said Wickford, again saluting the languid, exquisite hand, "your courage is no less charming than your charm is courageous."

And so great was his hurry that he telephoned to Inspector McGovern and to Michaelson at the theatre before he went from the hotel.

CHAPTER V

HANDS UP



AT three o'clock the inspector came to Andrew Michaelson's office with the cable messages replying to those he had sent. Wickford had been waiting for them, and he seemed to find the response of the French police all that he required.

"Getting at the mystery?" Michaelson questioned.

"This was no mystery," said Mc-

Govern, "with fourteen hundred eye-witnesses——"

"But yet you don't know who the robbers are."

The inspector endeavored to look like a man who is unable to tell all that he knows.

"Wait," said Wickford indulgently, "this was a mystery and it's still not perfectly clear. Very few criminals are showmen. And, fortunately, very few showmen are criminals. But once a showman always a showman, I believe."

"Witnessing the hold-up last night, studying the bandits' methods from dramatic entrance to efficient flight, I saw everywhere and in everything the showman's touch. And this made the mystery much less—less opaque."

"Meaning you will detect who did it?"

"Detection will be comparatively simple."

"It will?" Michaelson exclaimed.

"Yes. The suspects are narrowed down to about thirty persons. And I was able to mark three of the bandits."

"Good Lord—how?" cried McGovern.

"With my crime-wave watch, Inspector, the cheap-looking old ticker that was returned to me after three had handled it."

"Finger-prints?"

"Something much better as evidence, Inspector. A very talented old chap that I know, a brilliant chemist—who once nearly got tangled up with a smooth gang of counterfeiterers—created the watch and brought it to me."

"You see, the case is treated with a new radium solution that he has concocted. If left on the skin it begins to burn and produces a dark scar that doesn't wash off. But he vows there's no serious impairment of the tissues."

"I have from him the antidote also."

So I can cure any victim of the watch—when he gives himself up."

"GREAT! But say—then you did expect there'd be a stick-up last night?"

"I carry the watch nowadays whenever I'm traveling or in any way likely to be exposed to thieves," Wickford pursued. "I have a special pocket case for it. But even so, it's excessively hard on gloves."

"I'll admit, Inspector, that Agnes Corey told me her Jim had been tipped off to keep away from the theatre of her employment. Hearing this, I reasoned that Friend Michaelson's treasurer hadn't enough cash here in his safe to be worth the big risk."

"However, Audry Zenova was to appear, and she is celebrated the world over for her jewels. It seemed to me she must be the crooks' intended victim."

"So I came to the first night to see her—and see if her gems were real or publicity. If real, I intended warning her through Michaelson and giving Agnes the credit."

"Of course, the hold-up occurred to me as an outside, fantastic possibility. If night clubs and gambling rooms and restaurants, why not a crowded theatre? Hence—my trick watch, Inspector, and the insignificant five-spot that I contributed."

"It would have been absurd to yelp for a police guard. If such a condition had become known to the public it would have queered the Carlton as it would any other place of amusement. The robbers would merely have had to postpone their raid."

"Naturally, Zenova's advertised display filled the house with a very showy crowd—foreign sensation—tickets priced way up—and every woman adorned herself with her own best jewelry to meet, as it were, the competition of Europe's most lavishly lighted star."

"In short, the exploitation of Zenova's gem-strewn torso was like molasses to flies. It packed the theatre with rich and ornamented people, ripe for the robbers' plucking hands."

"And all my men need to do is find three such hands with dark scars that don't wash off," McGovern said.

"But first I have asked Michaelson to insist upon a dress rehearsal," Wickford explained.

"Why?"

"After the interruption last night, he has every right to demand that things run smoothly before another public performance."

"How long will it take?"

"I called them for three-forty-five," said Michaelson. "If all goes along regular——"

"It will," Wickford interrupted. "Come on, Inspector. I'll not waste your time. Seeing the revue rehearsed now will give you a better understanding of the crime, even if there is no audience."

WHILE Michaelson summoned his lieutenants, the lawyer and McGovern argued earnestly.

Zenova and her husband, Le Clerc and lesser members of the revue company were disposed to resent the abrupt call to rehearse.

But Andrew Michaelson, sustained by Wickford's enthusiasm, was firm about it. So presently a lone pianist in place of the orchestra was skimping the overture and then running into the first dance number.

The four girls gave an exhibition as moonlit and dazzling and no less graceful than that of the evening before. Following after them the small blonde sang her American song and pleased McGovern vastly.

And next the twelve bearded Russians, seeming taller than ever, who danced and sang to the dark and empty house; and if their songs rang out rather more harshly now, there

was, of course, the lack of orchestral volume and the piano inadequately supporting them.

Le Clerc, that masterly clown, came on with his mongrel leashed by the red suspenders.

"Go right into the juggling, please," said Wickford officiously.

But Michaelson did not object, and the clown seemed glad to accept any cut in his routine.

When he took up the tiny balls and sticks he mechanically moved down close to the footlights, to allow the customary lowering of a drop behind him. He came to the small revolver and cartridges, and again Wickford intruded.

"One moment, please," said he, and then to Michaelson and the inspector, who sat in the second row: "Do you see the showman at work, the careful timing—the robbers waited to spring their little surprise until just when last night's audience was watching these cartridges fall, and had its collective mind fixed on the menace of pistol bullets.

"The masked men flourished much more deadly-looking weapons, so can you wonder there was no outcry, no argument or resistance? The idea had taken root that sudden annihilation lurked in every gun. If you please, Monsieur Le Clerc—proceed," he added pleasantly.

The juggling clown had been listening so attentively that Wickford spoke to him a second time before he appeared ready to resume his act.

But now he handled the pistol and cartridges with an appreciably larger gesture, a greater assurance and skill than he had shown at his debut.

He dropped one cartridge only. As it struck the stage Wickford astonished Andrew Michaelson by raising a traffic officer's whistle to his lips and blowing it shrilly.

Up in the dim balcony men shouted. A woman's voice rose to a shriek.

"Police! Police!"—the voice of the usher, Agnes Corey!

And now revolvers were firing, in the balcony, from a stage box, at the rear of the orchestra—and the interior of the Carlton came terrifically to life with clamor and flash and curling acrid powder smoke.

"Everybody on stage!" Wickford had shouted.

Zenova and her players were neither prompt nor unanimous in rushing to view the battle. But four of the tall Russians came alertly enough, drawing revolvers and one had a bandaged hand. And then one had a wounded hand, seared and red.

"Drop those guns!" McGovern shouted.

The firing had ceased without signal.

"Hands up, you! Put 'em up, quick!"

And the center aisles now swarmed with McGovern's men.

CHAPTER VI

AND THE SHOW GOES ON



THINK that is all you need to know, Inspector," Wickford said.

"But what is it? Michaelson exclaimed.

"They were so well drilled for their raid last night, I had to give them a chance to repeat," said the lawyer blandly. "I felt sure we could make them behave as they had been trained to do if there were any semblance of resistance in the house."

"Will they have to arrest the whole revue? Are you representing me, Wickford, or ruining my business?"

Michaelson's visions of the prolonged and prosperous run at the Carlton, cherished despite the hold-up—improved, in fact, by that monumental publicity impulse—vanished away as the detectives proceeded with their round-up on the stage.

Agnes, hysterically excited by her participation, rushed down from the balcony to clasp the lawyer's hand.

"Didn't it work great, Mr. Wickford? Gee!"

"It did. And you did your screaming very professionally, Agnes. Mr. Michaelson will remember you."

"I don't care about any reward, so long as Jim's made safe, sir."

"But, say, what about tonight's show?" the theatre owner interrupted drearily. "It's sold out."

"It may not have to be canceled," Wickford said. "The inspector and his men will want to look up the records of all members of the company, of course. But perhaps we can arrange a bond. The robbery," he explained, "was planned and chiefly directed by Charles Donnau, alias Bonnat, alias Murrac—alias Capelli secretary to Madame Zenova. At this moment I fancy he is being taken in custody at the apartment of Madame."

"You bet," said McGovern. "Burke and Hollins 'll get him."

"This Donnau about a year ago effected a sensational escape from the French penal colony at Cayenne," Wickford related. "He was reported in various places around the Caribbean, and traced as far as New Orleans. He is the half-brother of one Philippe Donnau, that talented variety artist known to us as Le Clerc."

ATTENTION now directed to the juggling wizard found him yet crouching by the footlights where he had knelt to recover the cartridge as Wickford blew his whistle.

"Hey! What's the idea?"

With a sob Le Clerc had pressed the small property pistol to his temple. But one of McGovern's detectives, turning swiftly, kicked the weapon from his hand.

"Cheer up, young fellow," the inspector urged. "Remember you're a

clown. You've got a great act, too, I could see that. And many a good guy has almost been pulled under by some crooked relative."

"But this is monstrous—imbecile!" Zenova cried. "I demand that you send for the French Ambassador."

"All you need is a smart lawyer," said McGovern. "And Mr. Michaelson has got you the best in the business."

"Charles Donnau," Wickford continued, "is known to the continental police as a resourceful and relentless blackmailer. The troupe of Russians, so Madame informs us, was recruited by Clementine Donnau, theatrical agent, hustler—and sister of the formidable Charles."

"To me it seemed obvious that some members of the revue company were a part of the uncommonly well-conducted raid last night."

"With my opera glasses I had noticed one of the alleged Russian singers with several new and brightly crowned molars. The robber who complained of my cheap watch had similar dental adornments. Moreover, in spite of his mask I could see a stray patch of false hair, where the spirit gum had resisted his haste in removing the beard."

"Donnau, of course, besides smuggling criminal comrades into the country with artists' passports, had to add to his band a number of local gunmen to guard the many exits. And their leader was allowed to share the center of the stage, even though he was less elegantly arrayed. We can find that gang leader, because he also handled my watch and must have burned himself."

"You'll need no rough third degree methods, Inspector," the lawyer added. "The three will have painful

burns as the effect of the watch coating grows. And I will only consent to supply the antidote when they talk."

"You ought, therefore, to recover practically all of the plunder. And if there be any loss, I am sure that Madame Zenova and Le Clerc, with their great earning capacity during an American tour, will insist upon covering it in full."

"Audry, we must," Le Clerc pleaded.

"Madame," said Wickford, "despite her dramatic protest, did not lose any of the famous jewels. Nor has she attempted to collect insurance."

Zenova, comprehending, smiled upon him. Even her husband's sullen glare diminished.

"I am convinced and prepared to prove that these talented visitors were Charles Donnau's victims, too—subjected to an unbearable pressure by a master of extortion."

"Donnau blackmailed them—his sister in Paris also, I dare say—and took his reward in the dread form of silence and passive cooperation."

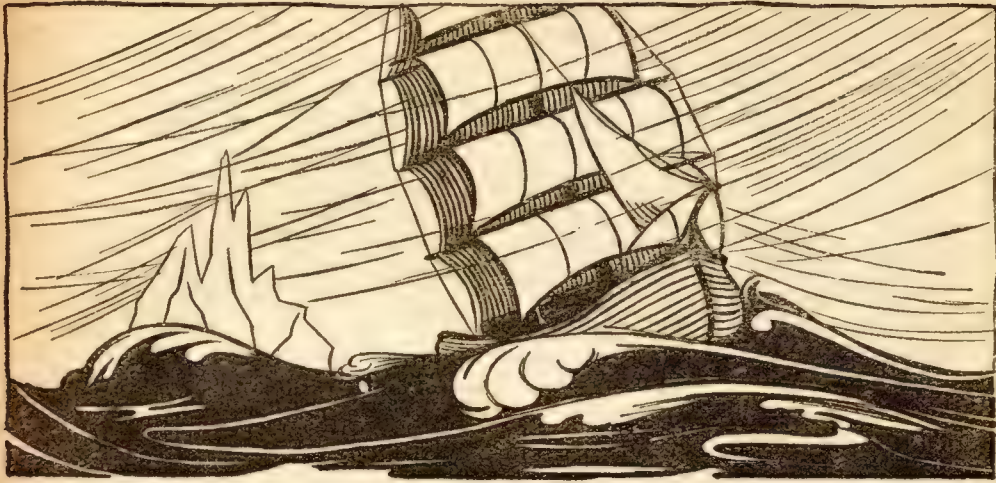
"Once he had extorted their least assistance to the scheme, they were in his grip and virtually doomed, afraid of the trap, afraid to try to escape it—compelled at last to aid importantly in one of the most spectacular crimes on record."

"Which," McGovern exclaimed, "in less than twenty-four hours, we've cleared up——"

He paused, embarrassed, and ended honestly:

"Well, of course, Wickford, it really was all your doing."

"No, Inspector, *we* did it," the lawyer chuckled. "I could never have fired off all those guns by myself."



Aboard The Millicent

By SINCLAIR GLUCK



NLY through an excess of courtesy could the little eating place be called a restaurant.

The tables were of soft unpainted wood, stained in places and carelessly scoured. They were seamed and rough with clumsy initials in which years of grease and grime had taken obstinate lodgment.

The chairs were plain and rickety. Dirty sawdust littered the floor. There were two broken panes in the dingy windows.

Behind the cashier's desk sat a billowing, blousy, red-faced creature past middle age, attired in a wrapper of the color of yellow clay. She clutched a stub of pencil in fat, dirty

fingers, mouthing to herself as she labored with it.

But the bang of the door procured me a stealthy, lowering regard from her protruding black eyes. She had no other customers.

She resumed her work and I walked to the table opposite her and sat down. Thereupon she turned her head and rasped a single word:

"Jules!"

The place was not appetizing. But it was better than the quay I had just left, where the stench of stagnant water and decaying fish, combined with that of the harbor mud exposed by the receding tide, positively assaulted the nostrils.

Marseilles may or may not be the

worst port in the world, but certain parts of it are assuredly the dirtiest and the most foul. I inhaled the penetrating aroma of boiled cabbage with which the little place reeked, in genuine delight at the contrast.

THE CAUTIOUS opening of a door at my back drew my attention. After an instant it opened wider and Jules appeared.

He was a long, stringy individual, older than the woman for whom he worked. He was watery-eyed and uncertain of mouth. Tiny red veins netted his sunken, stubbled cheeks.

A suit of hand-me-downs of an incredible dinginess hung loose on his shrunken limbs. Across one arm he carried a dirty napkin.

He moved vaguely in my direction and I saw that his feet were enormous. They seemed to precede one another with a comical caution as he approached.

Even the French peasant makes excellent soup when he chooses. So I ordered thick soup and bread. I raised my glance to the disfigured, bleary visage bending vaguely above me.

"And a bottle of good wine, if you have any," I added in French. "Red wine, if you please."

A spark flared in the sodden, red-rimmed eyes and flickered out. He turned and shambled away.

The soup was good. So was the wine. Soup plate, spoon and glass were thick and unattractive but clean.

Having served me, Jules hung uncertainly in the offing, eyeing the wine with a wolfish glance. I looked his way again.

"Won't you join me?" I inquired politely. "Get another glass, *Monsieur Jules*, and pull up a chair."

The old eyes lighted, swerved uneasily to the desk and dropped. From the huddled figure of *Madame* came a menacing glance.

"Come along," I urged in secret amusement. "Let me play host!"

AT THAT he turned and shuffled out again. Presently he came back with a second glass. He was thoughtful enough to fetch along another bottle of wine which he placed unostentatiously on a nearby table where I could see it. Then he drew up a chair and sat down facing me.

While I absorbed my soup he sought to regale me with rambling, bitter comments on the *sacre* business, the *sacre* smells and the *sacre* people of Marseilles who came within his ken.

But he downed two full glasses of wine with surprising speed and satisfaction. And by the time I was ready to drink mine his sunken cheeks were flushed, his bleared eyes shining. His mouth looked firmer and the sly and apprehensive glances he cast at the desk had grown less frequent.

I sipped my wine, set down the glass and caught his eye.

"But it is not of these things I wish to hear, friend Jules. It is of yourself. Tell me something of your life, eh?"

He stared—and shrugged.

"My life!" he cackled. "It is what you see, *M'sieur*!"

I shook my head.

"Doubtless you are a worthy and substantial citizen now, my friend. But you have your story, *n'est ce pas*? It was not always so—smooth?"

At that he merely stared, fuddled and apathetic.

"Jules," I suggested, "were you ever at sea?"

"*Mais, certainement, M'sieur!*"

"Good! Tell me then of your life at sea!"

"But, *M'sieur*——"

"Tell me of the happening that remains most vivid in your recollection!"

The old eyes swerved to my face at that. Jules drained his third glass, directed a glance of defiance in the direction of *Madame* and leaned across the table, bringing his blotched face close to mine.

"*Bien, M'sieur,*" he replied. "You are very kind. You shall have it."

"I AM of good bourgeois family, *M'sieur,*" he assured me proudly. "None of your *sousier* muck! But—as a boy I was always a dreamer. And I ran away to sea.

"I was born in Rouen, where the big ships still come. I spent my days on the river bank, watching the sailor men. I would lie there and dream in the sun, when school was over and I could get away. And I longed for the romance of the sea.

"It lured me, *M'sieur.*

"I longed for the whistling wind and the streaming skies and the open, angry sea. I longed for the slow-breathing, sullen blue of it beneath tropic skies.

"I wished to see far places and feel the thrill of strange and unknown dangers among hot white walls, beneath a white-hot moon.

"I sought—romance, *M'sieur,* of which I had read much——"

I settled back in my chair and smiled at him.

"But, you are a poet!" I laughed. He nodded, bleary, triumphant.

"I am a Frenchman, *M'sieur!*"

I laughed again.

"Well, did you find it?"

His face fell a little.

"Yes—I found it—and more!

"—was my first ship, *M'sieur,* my only ship," he went on, with more animation.

"What a craft! She was an English vessel, though most of her crew were French. In her day she had been of the best of the ships of wood. And she was still proud!

"It was on my sixteenth birthday

that I ran away from my old mother. I went to Bordeaux.

"And there, after many lean days, I picked up my ship. She plied from Marseilles up the coast, all the way to Norway.

"—and what food! The sailors told me of other ships. But aboard the *Millicent* we had the best.

"And how she sailed! How she dipped her dainty nose and tripped through the waves!

"She was alive. I loved her! We all loved her!"

THE BLOTCHED, unhealthy visage of Jules the waiter had taken on a queer glow of eagerness. It vanished suddenly, comically. His face fell. He leaned closer.

"But her captain, *M'sieur!* What a beast he was! We all hated him. Lacking the so good food and, perhaps a little, the beautiful sailing of the ship, he would have sailed alone so far as we were concerned, we others. What an animal!

"No man was safe within reach of his arm. He was a giant! An ogre! He had muscles like those of an orang. We feared him, all of us.

"Even our beautiful ship—she hated him, too, *M'sieur!*

"But he—I think he loved her, in his way. He would stride about her decks in the pride of his strength and his ownership, bestriding her, railing at her, insulting her, spitting with violence upon the decks we scrubbed!

"I was cabin boy for a time. Later, after several of our voyages, I became cook. He knocked me about from the first, worse than the others.

"He delighted to strike me. I was a mass of bruises until I learned to keep out of his way.

"All of us he knocked about and insulted most vilely. We went in terror of his blows and his great roaring voice, by day and by night.

"When our first voyage came to an

end, here at Marseilles, I sought to quit the ship. But I was young and alone, ignorant and afraid in a strange city.

"Nothing else offered, *M'sieur*. And I feared to try another ship, now that I knew something of the sea.

"Also, she drew me, the *Millicent*, drew me back again as she drew my mates. How he laughed when he saw me! And so we sailed again.

"VOYAGE after voyage I sailed in her, gliding sweetly through the laughing blue waves of our sunny southern ocean, setting my face to the cool salt spray of the western seas, plugging and lifting, battered and buffeted, through the sinister, resistless gray shoulders of the mountain waves which roll forever easterly to the Devil's Bay from the open Atlantic.

"Then northward, past the white cliffs of Dover, into the icy, tumbling North Sea. What voyages, *M'sieur*.

"I! I was beaten and knocked by that animal! But how sweetly the *Millicent* shook herself free from the gliding waters and lifted her beautiful, haughty nose above the baffled waves! How she scorned them, riding them, spurning them, one by one——"

The voice of Jules, quavering and husky at first, had grown fuller, deeper, passionately arresting beneath the spell of the wine and his salt sea memories.

NOW IT dropped and faltered a little.

"Captain 'Alsey, he called himself, *M'sieur*. There was no wife. But he had a daughter. And her he took with him on his voyages.

"Ah, what a lithe young figure it was, eager and full of life! She was tall and strong and beautiful, that English girl. As strong as I. And

she strode about the ship and loved her, as he did.

"In his way he loved his daughter too, that brute of a captain. He loved her because she was his, the dog!

"And sometimes when he was sober, which was not often, he would slap her and fondle her, calling her his 'Bit o' Pastry' and such phrases.

"Other times he would roll about his cabin, most abominably drunk. We would keep out of his way then, you may be sure.

"But she—she could not always do so. Then he would catch her and flog her until her shrieks went ringing through our ship, above the crash of the waves and the creak of the beams, above the scream of the wind in the cordage.

"What an animal, *M'sieur*!

"Still she loved him. She would creep away and weep for a time, then fall asleep and forget. Afterward he would fondle her once more and all would be forgiven——"

THE VOICE of Jules the waiter dropped another note.

"And now I have a strange thing to tell you, *M'sieur*, a very strange thing. You have only my word for it. But it is true. If my shipmates were here they would tell you the same.

"It is about our beautiful ship.

"I have told you that animal loved her, as he loved his daughter, because she was his. But the *Millicent*, she did not return his love, like the girl.

"I tell you that she hated him, *M'sieur*. We others, we have seen it——"

Jules broke off and eyed me questioningly.

Facing this battered, crumbling ruin of a man with his fuddled, flaming eyes, I felt no desire to smile. I nodded gravely.

"Yes, she hated him!" continued

Jules in triumph. "He was a great sailorman, a good navigator and a crafty opponent for the elements. We took his orders. Under *our* hands the *Millicent* battled fiercely through the worst of storms.

"Sometimes in rough weather he himself would go to the helm. It was a fancy of his and not at all customary.

"But him she would not obey, *M'sieur!* With our own eyes we saw it! She would veer and haw and buck like a mad thing when he took the wheel. And he was obliged to give it up!

"You will say this was because he was drunk. But it was not only that! Sailormen entertain strange fancies sometimes, alone between sea and sky. But ours was no fancy, *M'sieur!* It was a fact.

"When Captain 'Alsey took the wheel she would not answer the helm! She fought him—fought him until fear and awe pierced to his brazen soul and he gave way.

"Then he would curse her most horribly and stamp away to his cabin. And there would be another drinking bout and another thrashing for his daughter, who could not fight him.

"You do not believe this. But wait. I shall tell you of our last voyage and you shall judge."

JULES had drained his glass and the bottle as well. I waved him to the other bottle and he rose unsteadily and opened it, intercepting a second venomous glance from the cashier's desk, but shrugging his shoulders this time.

Presently he was seated again, pouring himself another drink at my invitation.

He took a great mouthful of wine, rolled it on his tongue and swallowed it at a gulp. Then he straightened in his chair and leaned over the table.

"It was in the late spring, twenty-

six years ago, that we cleared from Marseilles on our last voyage. We were bound for Christiania, laden with spices, sugar and olive oil and a small cargo of Italian wines. We were deep in the water.

"Captain 'Alsey had the prospect of a profitable voyage. He was pleased. And he showed it by getting most beastly drunk three days after we left port.

"Cueta was hull down on the horizon when his bout began. And the *Millicent* was bravely breasting the long Atlantic rollers, all her white canvas set and filled, her nose courageously aloft as always and her lee-board and taffrail almost awash. He knew how to load her and she was heaviest astern.

"His daughter read the signs, *M'sieur*, and she took refuge in my galley, tall and strong and rosy-cheeked but with fear in her handsome eyes.

"I had grown to love her, *M'sieur*. My heart was hers. But I did not know it until that day.

"She saw him no more that day, for if he sought her he never thought to look in the galley. But we others who saw him and heard his ravings and blasphemies, we went in fear of death.

"This was no ordinary drinking bout. The captain was a devil possessed. He stormed about the deck, waving his great hairy arms and streaming his foul curses.

"The mate was at the wheel. A silent, down-looking Cornishman, that one, with a grim mouth and a steady eye. Him the captain never had struck, to our knowledge. But even he was white about the lips that day.

"Nor was it altogether his violence we feared. We trembled lest that animal in his frenzy should send us all to the bottom with some crazy order.

"THERE was a brisk easterly breeze that day. The *Millicent* had all she could carry of canvas, heavy laden as she was.

"If the wind should freshen and the captain fail to shorten sail, we feared that even the *Millicent* would bury her nose and never rise again, or roll on her keel till her masts touched the waves and so settle to the bottom.

"Happily the wind dropped toward evening. And when night fell we were almost becalmed.

"Still we slipped through the waves as the stars came out. And the *Millicent* held to her course, dipping and rising through the long, sluggish rollers.

"Toward midnight the wind died altogether. I was still awake, crouching in my galley, talking in whispers to the girl and listening to the wild ravings and drunken muttering from the captain's cabin, for the night was very still.

"She had courage, that one. To hide the fear at her heart and in her eyes she laughed and swore at me because my face was white—but in a whisper, *M'sieur*, always in a whisper.

"Yes, I tell you that she was courageous. Until we heard that animal crash through her cabin door, shrieking her name and mouthing threats of terrible violence, she held her head high.

"But then she broke down. She wept and clung to my hand, her shaking body close to mine. It was terrible to me to see her strong young fearlessness overthrown—I loved her—

"There came a silence and we, too, fell silent, listening. My thought was all of the beautiful girl at my side. I, too, trembled, but with the strength of my adoration.

BUT I had been careless. We should have sat there in darkness, *M'sieur*,

and I had left a lantern burning. With the cunning of a devil he had crept on deck. He had seen our light.

"The galley door crashed open in the midst of our strained listening. The great, hairy monster stood swaying in the doorway, a leer in his bloodshot eyes, his shirt torn open to reveal his matted body, his huge, dirty fingers crooked——"

Jules broke off and crossed himself. Beneath their network of wrinkles and crimson veins his sunken cheeks had paled to a dirty gray. The bleared old eyes were wide and remote with vivid recollection.

"And then——" I prompted.

Jules started. His dazed regard returned to my face. His gray lips twitched away from his remaining teeth.

"With the opening of the door, *M'sieur*, a sea of icy fog came curling into my galley. Enveloped in that curtain of mist, he looked enormous, incredible.

"I saw him bearing down upon me. The lantern light flickered on his horrible face. I sat frozen to my seat. And from the shadows he struck, only once, a terrible blow——

"I was dashed to the floor and against the wall, setting my pots and pans in an avalanche about me. His great fist had struck the side of my head, tearing my ear.

"I was dazed. But I heard him accusing us of an infamy. I saw him seize the girl by the uplifted arm and drag her, screaming, into the fog.

"I heard her cries and the thud of her body as he hurled her along and flung her into his cabin.

"For a time, then, I could hear his great drunken voice threatening her most vilely. But she was silent.

"I dragged myself to my feet and washed the blood from my neck. I tied up my torn ear with a bit of rag, cursing the gross animal beneath my breath. I prayed that the drink had

got him by now and that he would be unable to beat the girl.

"But alas! He fell silent at length and I heard a struggle. She cried out. Then came the sound of blows. A terrible screaming began.

"Those shrieks ripped through the silence and darkness and fog like a blasphemy. And I crouched by my lantern and called down the vengeance of God upon the monster who commanded us.

"But they continued, choking screams and cries of a frightfulness. I could stand it no longer. The awful blows went on without abatement. I snatched up a heavy metal tray, the first thing that lay to my hand. I plunged out into the fog.

"IT MUFFLED and blinded and choked me, the fog. But I felt my way to his door, guided by that endless screaming.

"I flung open his cabin door. He had thrown the girl across his table. He was holding her down and flogging her about the legs and body with a heavy rope's end. Head flung back with her shrieking, she sought to protect herself with bruised and battered fingers.

"I went mad at the sight, *M'sieur*. Love lent me courage. I sprang into the cabin. I raised the heavy tray, whirled it sideways and sent it skimming across her body, at his face. The edge of it caught him below the ear and the tray clattered down upon the girl.

"Such a blow should have broken the neck of a strong man. It sent him reeling back. He dropped the rope and clapped his great hand to the wound.

"Then he gave forth a terrible bellows of rage and came plunging toward me. And I whirled about and fled from him, into the fog."

Jules paused to drain the glass which I had refilled for him. His

fingers were shaking and the wine spilled over on them. He set down his glass and licked them, absently.

"Yes, I fled away from him into the fog. I fled to the ship's side.

"But he had ears like a cat. He caught the sound of my stumbling feet. He came pounding after me. And I crouched down by the rail and gave myself up for lost.

"Then madness came upon him. He thought that I had jumped overboard. He could not see me crouching there, because of the darkness and the fog.

"He leaned far over the side and peered downward, cursing me. And at that moment the *Millicent* took her revenge. Or else the good God answered my prayer.

"But I think that it was our beautiful ship. And so did those others, my shipmates. And what a revenge, *M'sieur!*

"SUDDENLY and without warning she staggered beneath us, staggered and winced sideways, like a stricken thing. The captain had leaned too far out. The jerk of the ship overbalanced him.

"I leaped to my feet at the sound of his wild yell. The fog was shredding away. The moon was high and her light came streaming through for an instant—only an instant. But I saw the captain's body plunging down. I saw it check and catch before it reached the water—

"I looked upward in terror. I reached out over the rail and laid my hand, my open palm, upon a wall of ice, a mountain of ice, straight and flat as a wall, reaching up and up, all silver in the moonlight, towering high above the masts—

"I looked down, calling upon the saints. Only for that instant longer the moonlight lasted. But I saw that the *Millicent* was edging in once more.

"I heard one terrible scream. I saw her rub her side, lovingly, against that mighty wall. I saw the captain's body, caught between the two, flatten and crunch and burst——"

Jules checked and stared at me with bloodshot eyes. Wine-tinged bubbles oozed at the corners of his mouth.

"And then," he whispered, "the freezing fog closed down. I stood rooted to the spot, in darkness and silence, save for the jar and scrape of the *Millicent* against the berg and the sound of muffled sobbing from the captain's cabin."

JULES put forth a shaking hand and for the last time drained his glass. His bleared old eyes gazed into mine in a kind of drunken triumph.

"That is all, *M'sieur!*" he concluded thickly.

"But the girl, Jules, what became of her?"

The man's eyes wavered. Suddenly he laughed, leering at me across the table. His glance swerved to the desk.

"Come here, my dear!" he cackled, "*M'sieur* desires the pleasure of an introduction!"

The woman at the desk lifted her blousy, evil face and sent him a lowering glance, full of venomous meaning.

"Worthless, drunken swine," she observed. "I'll rattle the wine from your bones, when *M'sieur* has gone!"

From the face of Jules, the waiter, the valor of his potations slowly faded as he gazed at her. His eyes filled with drunken tears and he turned back to me.

He waved a trembling hand.

"You see, *M'sieur*," he wept, "she is the captain, over again!"

Death in the Pot

ON THE first Sunday in the year 1749, Thomas Lilly, son of a farmer in the parish of Kelso, Scotland, a young man intended for the ministry of the Church of Scotland, remained at home with a shepherd boy. All the rest of the family but a maid servant had gone to church.

The two lads were sitting by the fire while the maid had gone to the well for water, when there entered a venerable old gentleman whom they did not know. After greeting them he told the student to take up the family Bible and turn to a certain chapter and verse of the Second Book of Kings.

The student did so and read—"There is death in the pot."

Then the old man left the house.

When he had gone the student filled two bowls with soup, and when the maid returned he and the other boy appeared to be enjoying the food, though they took care not to taste it. They invited the maid to join them, and she took a bowl of it, but retired to her room to eat it.

The collie dog followed her, and she set the soup before it. It ate greedily, and before the family had returned from church expired in great agony.

The family and servants returned from church and sat down to table. The maid Peggy filled all the bowls and the master began to say grace.

"Oh Lord," he prayed, "we have been hearing the word from the mouth of thy aged servant, Mr. Ramsay; we have been alarmed by the great famine in Samaria, and by the verse about death being in the pot."

Here the young scholar interrupted his father:

"Yes, father, there is death in the pot now here, as well as there was once in Israel. Touch not! Taste not! See the dog dead by the poisoned pot."

Peggy, hearing this, fell into a fit, from which she was with some difficulty recovered, and confessed her evil design. She was allowed to go free, however, and left the country.



The Dallas Heart

By ETHEL WALBERT

A THREE-PART STORY—PART I

Through the storm of lightning and howling wind, of fear and clashing emotions, shines the lure of THE DALLAS HEART. There's an atmosphere of mingled weirdness and adventure and tenderness that builds up to the kind of climax that will make you think the story all too short. Ethel Walbert knows the art of word-painting, and with a deft and sympathetic touch she portrays the lust of an avaricious old miser and the love of a maid for a maid.

CHAPTER I

SCRATCHES



WAS lost in the dismal old swamp, and night was coming!

It had been such a wild goose chase that I almost doubted my sanity. I had come secretly to Swamp Hollow to meet old Abner Longwood—and here I was, bogged and lost in a morass of watery waste that completely bewildered me.

It was all on account of Nancy Lee and a spirit of adventure. Nancy and

I had chummed together, starved together and laughed together at the pranks fate played on us; but when Nancy had been laid up in a hospital as the result of an accident I had undertaken to salvage a part of the Longwood fortune that belonged to her.

From what Nancy had told me, Uncle Abner was a special kind of scoundrel who would rob the living and the dead, and to try to obtain restitution from him now, after the lapse of so many years, was like seeking gold from the sea; but I had

undertaken the mission for Nancy's sake, with the result that I found myself in a predicament that terrified me.

Her Uncle Abner had brought on a family quarrel and driven her mother away from her home in Wildwood—where she had lost caste through a mistake or as the result of mischief-makers—to begin a life of disgrace and drudgery in the city. And there she had remained until something had broken, and Nancy had been left an orphan among strange people.

Not satisfied with this, Abner Longwood had appropriated to his own use all that belonged to Nancy, robbing her of her inheritance through legal technicalities.

There had been a considerable fortune that the Dallas sisters had inherited from old Judge Dallas. But the management of the estate had fallen into Abner's hands. And when he had married Janice, the older of the two sisters, he had had everything his own way.

When I had learned the sordid details of Nancy's early life, I had tried to induce her to go to law about it. But she had refused to do anything—she would not even write to demand her mother's share.

In a moment of misdirected enthusiasm I had volunteered to undertake the mission. I had decided to go to Wildwood and try by force, persuasion or flattery to induce the old man to consider Nancy's needs.

Abner Longwood lived—a silent, sullen recluse, with not even a servant—in the very heart of the dismal swamp. When I had learned of this, I had been certain I could frighten or cajole him into parting with some of his stolen possessions.

The man, I had reasoned, was suffering from the torments of an uneasy conscience.

But I had not bargained on getting lost in the swamp, with night ap-

proaching. I had halted finally on the banks of a dark pool of mud and slime, completely submerged in the shadows of the swamp, when I heard a splash and the welcome sound of a human voice.

"Hello!" it called.

THERE was a young man, as mud-spattered as I was, gazing across the treacherous pool at me. I was so relieved by the sight of him as a possible rescuer that I smiled, and exclaimed:

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you!"

"I guess it's mutual!" he laughed good-naturedly. "I was hoping to see some one. But I didn't expect to find a water nymph bogged in this awful hole. May I come across?"

"I couldn't prevent you if I wanted to, which I don't," I answered with so much relief in my voice that he noticed it.

"Lost?" he added a few moments later when he stood before me.

There was blood on his hands and clothes, which I could not fail to observe, and his face was rough and bristly with a two days' beard. But for all that it was handsome.

"Why should you think that?" I asked, smiling. "Do I look so forlorn?"

"Yes, I think you do," he nodded after a moment's keen scrutiny. "And I—I'm lost, too—that is, a little turned around. I won't say actually lost. I suppose any one could find his way out of this dismal hole if he kept going straight in any one direction."

"Yes," I nodded, "but what's to prevent you from wandering around and around in a circle? I've heard that lost people do that in a thick woods or swamp."

"I don't believe it!" he declared. "It's a bogey old gossips tell to frighten children."

He looked at the dark pool at my feet, and then at his hands and

clothes, both mud-spattered and blood-stained.

"I'll wash up," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. I watched him go through his ablutions, washing his hands and face by throwing the water up and swishing it around, making a great time of it, splashing and snorting, and finally flirting his head like a shaggy dog to clear his eyes and hair.

When he came to cleaning the blood from his shirt sleeve, my curiosity was aroused. He had betrayed no cut or scratch to account for the blood.

"You've scratched yourself?" I said.

"Yes—no," he stammered in confusion. "Why, yes, I suppose I have, and you're cut and scratched. Look at the blood on your arms."

"It's nothing," I murmured faintly. "I fell and cut myself."

"Let me see it," he added masterfully, taking the arm and examining it. "I'll wash it for you."

He was much gentler this time, almost tender in the way he washed the dirt out of the scratch. Once or twice he paused to look at it and then at me. He shook his head finally, and said:

"You don't live around here."

"No. And you?"

He laughed pleasantly, and admitted: "I'm a stranger, too."

We sat and smiled, appraising each other frankly, and not out of the corners of our eyes.

We were not children; we had both passed that period when a chance meeting arouses sex curiosity or tempts one to flirt or make believe; we were neither bashful nor awkward in each other's society, although we were alone and lost in the heart of a great swamp.

We were frankly sophisticated, and because we recognized kindred spir-

its we felt at ease, and liked each other all the more for it.

"You haven't told me yet," he added after a long pause, smiling half humorously, "why you happen to be alone in this dismal old hole. It's the last place in the world one would expect to find—find——"

He paused to glance at me questioningly before finishing.

"—well, to find a young lady of your quality."

He was grave and sincere, even though his eyes twinkled.

"Quality," I said, "is so indefinite. If you'd said beautiful I'd understand."

"I came near saying it," he laughed. "Most women like to be called beautiful."

"Do they? Are you sure that isn't a conceit of yours handed down from others? It isn't original."

"No, I'll admit that. But you haven't satisfied my curiosity yet. Are you going to?"

THERE was really no reason why I should not explain, and as I might need his assistance I decided to be frank and drop all circumlocution.

"I was on my way to Swamp Hollow when I got lost."

He started and frowned, giving me a quick, inquiring glance.

We both remained silent a moment, gazing at the pool—he very grave and motionless, I curious and vaguely apprehensive.

"Swamp Hollow," he began after a lengthy pause, "is seldom visited. It's a lonely place. Do you know anything about it?"

"A little."

"A little knowledge is sometimes dangerous," he quoted, smiling again. "If I were you I wouldn't go on."

"Why not?" I asked sharply.

"Because—because——" he stammered, and then came to an abrupt stop.

"I can't tell you," he added later. "But take my advice. Don't go! Come with me. I was on my way out of the swamp. Together we can find a trail."

I shook my head stubbornly.

"I'm going on," I said. "If you know the way to the house you'll help me!"

After another pause he shook his head slowly.

"No, I shan't do that! You must go out with me."

His calm assurance that I would obey him piqued me. I was not accustomed to being dictated to. I smiled and shook my head.

"I'll find it alone if you won't go with me."

I rose from the log and stood before him.

"My dear young lady," he began, rising also, "if you will be stubborn you must take the consequences. I've warned you, and I've said I wouldn't guide you. Now if you persist it must be at your own risk."

"Thank you!" I retorted. "I'll take the risk and absolve you of all blame."

I moved away, chin in the air, determined to find my way and not let him think I was dependent upon his help. He neither moved nor spoke. I hesitated for a second, hoping that he would relent—and then, finding him as stubborn as myself, I plunged blindly into the thick bushes, not knowing which way I was going or where I would land.

CHAPTER II

CARRIED THROUGH THE STORM



IT was a foolish thing to do, for I was as much lost as ever, and the way did not improve any; but there still lurked back in my mind a suspicion, or at least a hope, that he would follow and either renew his persuasion

or meekly submit and show me the way.

It was quite feminine to appear perverse under such circumstances, but even more so to show disappointment and chagrin at the outcome.

I was piqued and irritated, but not once did I turn my head. I would not give him the satisfaction of guessing that I already regretted my act.

I plunged blindly forward and, as if that might excite his sympathy, I chose the very worst, tearing through a wall of vines that threatened to shred me of all outer garments, and splashing in pools of muddy water that sucked and gurgled horribly all around me.

Not for worlds would I have weakened when he did not come to my rescue. Like a bird caught in a snare I struggled desperately onward until the dark, dank pool was left far behind.

I was not immediately conscious of it, but dusk was gathering in the swamp. And when it dawned upon me that night was approaching I experienced a new panicky feeling. It was bad enough to be lost in such a place in broad daylight, but to spend the night there was a thing too dreadful to face. I grew suddenly frightened, and the reaction left me weak and trembling.

In the midst of my fright a vivid flash of lightning, followed by an ear-splitting crash of thunder, brought me to my feet with a jump.

A storm had been brewing, and the dark clouds obscuring the sun were more responsible for the twilight than the approaching night. There was little consolation in this, for of the two the storm was hardly less desirable.

I screamed and closed my ears and eyes as the second crash reverberated among the hills and came booming and rolling down into the valley. The wind suddenly rose with violence,

bending the treetops and whipping the underbrush as it rushed through them, literally tearing and twisting off leaves and branches, blowing down huge, rotten trunks that fell with dull, crashing thuds that startled the birds from their nests and filled the whole swamp with terrifying sounds.

I huddled in silent terror beneath a huge oak, forgetting in my panic that a tree in a thunder storm is a poor refuge, and listened with beating heart to the warring of the elements.

For a time there was no rain. It was a wind storm, which in a woods or swamp is even more dangerous and awe-inspiring than rain.

Falling branches and trees crashed around me. How soon one would find me out and strike me to the earth seemed only a matter of moments.

To my excited imagination the very demons of the swamp had risen in their fury to punish me for invading their home.

My senses reeled under the impact of the violent sensations. And when the rain came, in sheets and torrents, it had hardly any further effect than to increase my trembling.

I was wet through in a minute, drenched to the skin. The tree offered no more shelter than a storm-riddled umbrella. The water poured through its leafy canopy in spouting streams.

I slumped down at its foot—a drenched, half-drowned, forlorn figure, expecting and waiting for my doom, quite sure that I could not survive the terrific ordeal.

All my reason and sanity deserted me. I was left only the helplessness of a child, or, rather, that of a creature of highly complex emotions suddenly stripped of the sustaining powers of reason and education.

In my plight I hadn't the stolid self-control and resourcefulness of the primitive woman. All that had made her brave and courageous had been bred out of me.

IN THE midst of my fright there came crashing toward me a sound that was not made by the wind or rain—and through the wind-swept, interlacing branches of the swamp I saw the face of the one I had run from.

It was white and set, but it was not the terror of the storm that twisted it. A greater terror I knew was responsible for the haggard expression, and there came over me a sweet uplift of soul that no wind or rain could entirely nullify.

How strong and violent he was, brushing aside the whipping branches as if they were so many annoying insects, splashing in water up to his knees, disregarding the rain and wind and falling trees as if they were unimportant details. And once he paused as he broke through a dense thicket to shout:

"Hello! Where are you?"

Now I should have answered at once. I had been so frightened before that a call of another person would have seemed like a miracle, and I should have responded with relief.

But his white, strained face and the startled look in his eyes held me in silence. I was fascinated by them, or rather, elated by the thought that I was the cause of them.

He had come searching for me. The storm had aroused his chivalry—but it was eleventh-hour penitence, and I was not ready to reward it immediately.

Perhaps he thought that I was dead, killed by a fallen tree or by a bolt of lightning or drowned in one of the slimy pools, and, conscience-stricken, was coming to the rescue. It was not exactly a flattering thought, but it had its pleasing side.

"Hello!" he shouted again, cupping his lips with his hands.

Standing there rain-drenched, disheveled and scratched, with the wild swamp in a turmoil of fury for a

background, with his face to the wind which whipped and scourged cruelly, he looked the heroic figure of some storm-born demigod of the woods.

In the half light his face was a white patch, illuminated and glorified by every flash of lightning. His eyes were startled but defiant pools of liquid fire that shot a challenge to wind and rain. His body was swaying and lurching before the storm, as sturdy and stalwart as the oaks that bend but never break.

"Hello!" he repeated for the third time.

There was fear and apprehension in the voice. It rose to a bellow and went echoing above the lashing fury of the storm, clear and resonant as a trumpet.

It was then, when his eager eyes strayed toward me, that I moved and responded with a low groan. He must have seen my white, rain-soaked dress, for he came striding toward me through water and muddy bog.

He lifted me as easily and tenderly as if I had been a child, his strong arms holding me aloft above the muddy, rain-splashed earth, while he brought his face close, his eyes peering down into mine.

"Thank God I've found you!" he breathed fervently.

Then he kissed me. It was an act so simple and spontaneous that it seemed quite natural.

"You're soaked to the skin," he added, holding me closer.

I nodded silently, shivering in his arms. He was breathing hard, as if the effort were really beginning to tell upon his strength.

THE storm had not abated. If anything, it was increasing, breaking about us with demoniacal fury. The wind came charging with hurricane force, ripping, tearing and demolishing. The rain was dashing in sheets

into our faces, the lightning playing continually up and down the swamp, while the thunder rolled and crashed without intermission.

The ordinary swamp pools were filling and running over, forming lakes and streams. The trees were bending and swaying, twigs and branches continually breaking and snapping with a sound like the crackle of small arms in a battle, with the rumble of the thunder for the heavy artillery.

"We must find shelter," he gasped a moment later, struggling from the mire into which his feet had sunk. "We'll drown here."

In the blackness of the storm, intensified now by the darkness of approaching night, we could see little except by the aid of the lightning flashes which, fortunately, came at such close intervals that the effect was almost continuous. They blinded us, but they lighted our way.

I clung to him, jumping and shivering with every crash. When a tree fell with thundering noise close to us I screamed and hid my face against his shoulders. Once he splashed blindly into a deeper puddle and sank to his knees, but he did not let the mud touch me.

Slowly, like a ship weathering a gale, coming up after being submerged by a giant wave, he rose to his feet and staggered onward again.

How long he carried me through the blinding storm or how far, I could not guess. It was all a terrible nightmare to me. All sensation except fear had left me.

I was neither cold nor tired, nor conscious of any physical discomfort. Fear had conquered every other feeling, and stupefied my body.

Once when he ran into a tree, stumbling against it so that my arm took most of the shock, I did not wince or cry out. I was hardly conscious of pain.

He swore under his breath. I could hear that distinctly. And then he lurched onward again, trying to shield me from another accident by backing through the bushes when they grew thick and impenetrable.

Resting trustfully in his arms, clinging to him, I felt secure, though the storm raged and beat about our heads with merciless fury.

For a time I lay in a painless stupor, lulled into peace and security by the steady splashing of his feet and the jerking of his body. Not even the rain and wind could arouse me.

But when he paused a second, shifting my position to ease the strain on his arms, I stirred and opened my eyes.

"It ought to be off there," I heard him mutter. "It must be!"

I saw him bend and peer through the darkness, and when a vivid flash of lightning came he grunted with satisfaction.

"Yes, it's there," he added, beginning the rhythmic lurching again.

I vaguely wondered what it was that he was seeking. Some shelter? Was there a cabin of some kind in the swamp?

"Here we are!" he cried finally in exultation.

"Where?" I raised my head and looked around.

"Swamp Hollow!"

Of course, he meant Swamp Hollow house, the one I had missed—Abner Longwood's abode.

I WAS excited now, forgetting some of my fear. Against a black background I saw the outlines of the house in clear relief every time a flash of lightning shattered the gloom.

A house of many gables and towers, it appeared to me—angular and sprawling, without architectural beauty or shape, more like a crouch-

ing monster of the dark rearing its form above the mud of the swamp.

I was fascinated by it. The storm added an element of weirdness to it that it must have lacked in the daytime, and each darkening of tower and gable between flashes made the next glimpse more picturesque.

It was the picture of the photograph, limned against black thunder clouds. But to the imagination it changed and shifted, revealing new wonders—now dark and sinister, now bright and dazzling. At a distance it seemed to grow out of the swamp, with the tall trees blending with it so that no line of separation could be distinguished.

My unknown rescuer had paused, and I could feel the tensing of his muscles and the hard beating of his heart against my body. We were still a distance from the house and his back was to the storm which beat furiously upon him, the wind tearing at his clothes and hair.

He looked down once and saw my unprotected head.

That seemed to decide him, for he started forward again, trudging stolidly and heavily through the mud and water. Not another word escaped his lips, but he was breathing like a horse nearly spent with exhaustion or a man laboring under some great excitement.

We gained the shelter of the back porch, where he leaned against a post, still holding my dripping figure, and craned his head forward as if listening.

The house was all dark, and I wondered if Abner had gone to bed. Could he be sleeping through such a violent storm?

"Knock!" I whispered. "He'll let us in on such a night."

He laughed a little bitterly.

"I'll knock," he said, approaching the door, "but nobody will answer."

"Why not?" I asked, shivering.

"You're cold!" he added as if surprised, and ignoring my question.

"I'm wet," I murmured, "and the water's cold."

This statement seemed to arouse him, for he immediately tramped across the porch and fumbled with the latch of the kitchen door. It was not locked, and when it flew violently open and a gust of wind banged it he entered quickly and shut out the storm.

He stood a moment with his back to the door as if to block the entrance of any other, breathing hard and trembling.

I slipped out of his arms and stood by his side, waiting breathlessly for the next flash of lightning to give me a view of the interior which seemed a thousand times darker than the swamp outside. I know I shivered until my teeth chattered, but whether from the chill of the rain or some vague apprehension I could not say.

I sought his arm for support, and found it shaking as badly as mine.

"It's all right, isn't it?" I said feebly.

He did not answer, but clutched my arm with a force that made me wince. Then the lightning illuminated the room, flashing so brightly that it seemed like day. The whole interior was photographed on my brain in one intense, blinding moment.

It was a large room—not the kitchen, as I had imagined, but the dining or living room—with a low-beamed ceiling, the sides wainscoted half way up, and the floor laid in hard woods.

There were chairs and tables of some ancient pattern, heavily carved and designed with a solidity of purpose that went well with the rest of the room; there were rugs and skins on the floor, whose beauty or worth I could not judge in that brief instant; and pictures were on the wall,

with books lining the whole of one side.

But it was none of these things that caught the eye and held it. They all faded from view, forming only a frame to the picture that was suddenly revealed to us. Our eyes focussed on it with startling understanding.

I shivered and drew back with a little cry of fear. He caught me, and for a moment held me in blind silence.

Another flash of lightning, and my first impression was confirmed.

A MAN lay stretched on the floor, face upward, with one hand in a pool of blood. His face was old and wrinkled, his hair white, except where the blood had stained it.

I gasped and turned away.

"Who is it?" I whispered in terror.

A bitter laugh that made my nerves tingle—and then in a gentle voice he answered:

"It's Uncle Abner!"

"Uncle Abner?"

"Yes," he added, "it was to save you from this sight that I warned you not to go on. But the storm got you—got both of us. Now——"

He stopped and waved a hand helplessly as if resigned to his fate.

CHAPTER III

FIRE LIGHT

THE gruesome discovery was no more startling to me than the words of my unknown rescuer. But for a time, even after he repeated the name, I was unable to grasp its full significance.

Uncle Abner! Why, of course, people might call him that in Wildwood—or didn't they? Why had he used that phrase?

Was Abner Longwood related to him? Nancy had said nothing about nieces and nephews.

"Uncle Abner!" I repeated after a

long pause, speaking slowly. "Was he your uncle?"

"Yes, or I wouldn't be calling him that. I'm not sure that I want to acknowledge the relationship. He was anything but an uncle to me while he was alive, and now—in death—well," he shrugged his shoulders, "I'll try to be charitable."

Intermittent flashes of lightning cast the room into brilliant daylight, and with each flare the body of the dead man on the floor stood out in startling relief.

His white face and hair contrasted sharply with the dark patch of blood, and the limp arms and legs were drawn up as if, in the death agony, he had struggled to rise to his feet.

I watched the figure in a sort of silent stupor.

"I didn't want to get you into this," I heard my companion of the swamp say. "It's not a pretty sight. Murder is always gruesome——"

"Murder!" I interrupted, speaking quickly.

"Of course! You knew that, didn't you?"

I nodded, my throat and lips too dry to articulate a reply. The most brilliant flash of the storm, followed by deep-toned, nerve-shattering thunder, filled the room and held everything for a moment in its light.

I looked into my companion's face. The eyes were sombre and downcast, the brow clouded, the head drooping.

Suddenly I thought of the blood on his hands and sleeves, and a horror of suspicion seized me. I caught at his arm.

"You knew?" I whispered. "You knew before you met me?"

He nodded. "Yes, I tried to save you from this. But now——"

Involuntarily I shrank away from him. I could not for the life of me do otherwise, but when he noticed it and gave a great start I was ashamed of myself.

To make amends I reached out and took his hand, but he pushed mine away.

"You think I'm the murderer?" he asked a little bitterly.

I did not reply, and he continued: "But it's natural. You don't know me. Even if you did——"

He broke off with a harsh, bitter laugh.

"Well, it doesn't matter," he added. "He's dead, and that ends it. I was a fool to come back. He wouldn't have listened to me if——"

That trick of his of breaking off suddenly in the midst of a sentence was irritating, and I said sharply: "Go on! Tell me all! I must know! You must!"

He was silent a moment, watching me, taking advantage of every flash of lightning. Finally he shook his head slowly.

"I don't know why I should tell you. It's a family affair. Strangers——"

"Strangers!" I broke in. "Do you call me a stranger?"

"No," he said after a pause, "I seem to have known you for years. Sometimes we feel that way, meeting people for the first time. It is as if we'd always known them."

"Perhaps we have met," I interrupted.

"No, not that I can recall," he replied gravely. "Your face——"

"Listen! You haven't told me your name."

HE SMILED and nodded his head before answering.

"Jerry Longwood!"

"Jerry Longwood," I repeated absently.

"Yes, I'm a Longwood—Uncle Abner's nephew, although he disowned me and cursed me years ago. We never could get along together. We always quarreled. Even as a boy I disliked him, and he me. I was al-

ways too rough and boisterous for him."

Here were complications that I had not foreseen, and I began blaming Nancy for not telling me of this side of the family history.

Should I carry out my original plan and introduce myself as Nancy Lee? I was a little skeptical of Jerry Longwood, afraid that those eyes might penetrate through my deception, and for a moment I was torn between conflicting emotions.

The body of the dead man on the floor suddenly diverted my mind. I shuddered and asked:

"What happened? Who killed him? Do you know?"

He smiled in spite of the harrowing circumstances, and said:

"A few minutes ago you thought I was the murderer."

"Oh, no!" I protested.

But unconsciously my eyes sought his hand and sleeves where I had seen the dried blood.

"Others might think the same," he continued, ignoring my interruption. "It would be natural. Circumstantial evidences are against me. I was fleeing from the house and swamp when I met you."

I nodded silently, urging him with my eyes to go on.

"Then knowing what you would find here," he added, "I tried to dissuade you from going on."

"If I'd known," I began weakly, "I'd have listened, but——"

He turned to me and asked abruptly: "Won't you tell me your name and why you wanted to come here?"

I hesitated a long time, now that a decision had to be made, and my silence and embarrassment became noticeable. Finally, in desperation, I blurted out:

"Do you remember Nancy Lee?"

"Nancy Lee!" he repeated slowly, frowning in an attempt to remember.

I did not help him, but waited

patiently. Gradually his eyes narrowed, and then with a great start he exclaimed:

"Do you mean Aunt Mary's child? Yes, I recall her name was Nancy—Nancy Lee! Why, Nancy," he added, seizing both of my hands, "can it be possible? Why—why——"

He became a little incoherent and stammered to a pause, all the while shaking my hands and exhibiting extraordinary emotion. He all but kissed me again, but I drew back when he leaned toward me.

"Nancy Lee!" he repeated. "Aunt Mary's child! I should have known you at once. I did in a way. I told you I felt as if we'd met before. I understand now. After all blood is thicker than water, isn't it?"

HE CHUCKLED and tried to draw me nearer, but I was not particularly pleased, and it was on the tip of my tongue to tell him the truth when a noise quite different from any made by the storm startled both of us. We listened in breathless silence, holding hands.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"It sounded like—like a groan," he replied slowly in a low voice.

Now as there could be only one explanation for that, if it were true, I recoiled; and then, recovering myself, I tried to collect my senses.

He should have spoken or acted first, and I waited for him. But he was silent and motionless, listening for a repetition of the sound. When I could endure the silence no longer, I broke out in a trembling voice:

"He's still alive! He's not dead!"

"Not dead!" was the mechanical reply. "Oh, yes, he is! I made sure of that before I left. He was stone dead—cold and stiff."

"But he groaned," I added. "I heard him. So did you."

We stood there, clinging to each other, watching the figure on the

floor, waiting for it to move or speak. The peak of the storm had passed, and the lightning flashes were less prolonged and coming at longer intervals. The wind still howled and shrieked dismally, rattling loose boards and shutters and playing pandemonium among the tree branches.

The periods of total darkness between flashes became so prolonged that I grew half hysterical waiting for the light, and once when the room remained black for a full minute I could not stifle an inclination to cry out:

"Oh, we must have a light! I can't stand it!"

His arms went around me protectingly, and his voice was tender and soothing.

"Nothing can hurt you, Nancy, but if you're frightened I'll take you in the other room."

"No! No!" I cried when I realized that to reach the next room I would be compelled to pass close to Abner Longwood's body. "You must strike a light! Find one!"

I knew by his hesitation that he did not take kindly to this request, and his labored breathing told me that his excitement was nearly as great as mine. I clutched at his hand and squeezed it desperately. He returned the pressure, and then said steadily:

"All right, Nancy, I'll strike a light, but I'm not sure it's safe."

"Safe! Why isn't it safe? It's safer than this darkness!"

He disengaged a hand and fumbled in a pocket. A few seconds later he produced a metal match case and struck a light and held it over his head until the flame went out.

"You see, nothing is wrong," he assured me. "It was only our imagination—or the storm."

"No! No!" I shuddered. "It was a groan."

"Let me take you into the next room," he said gently. "It's the sight of the body that frightens you. I can assure you beyond a doubt that Uncle Abner's been dead for an hour or more. Come, now, hold my arm; I'll lead you past him."

I hadn't the physical power to protest, and the words died in my dry throat. Before I realized it I was being led across the room, a hand guiding me.

But when we got opposite the body my legs collapsed under me. I would have fallen in a swoon if he hadn't picked me up and carried me.

When I recovered some of my self-possession I was lying on a couch. Jerry had closed the door, shutting out the gruesome sight that had terrified me. He was fumbling around in the dark.

Fearful of losing him, I called softly. He was instantly at my side.

"I'm making a fire in the grate," he said. "We're both wet to the skin. It will dry our clothes and give us some light."

I nodded mutely and released his hand. When he struck a match and ignited the kindlings in the fireplace I drew a sigh of relief. It was a big fireplace, large enough to accommodate six-foot logs; but there was nothing in it but a few dry kindlings and several pieces of cannel coal.

"Uncle Abner always kept this ready for a fire," Jerry said, chuckling to himself, "but I don't believe it's been lighted for years. He was too miserly. I shouldn't be surprised if it were the same coal that's always been in it."

I was more interested in the fire than in his reflections, and when it blazed up I stretched forth my hands to its grateful warmth.

Jerry moved the couch close to the blaze and then sat down on a hard stool at the foot of it. The kindlings burned freely, casting quaint shadows

in the back of the room, but I kept my eyes on the fire, dreading to look behind me.

The warmth was so grateful that gradually the chill that had shaken my body subsided. Some of my fear went with it.

Jerry rose and crossed the room to the windows, pulled down the shades and drew the heavy curtains to shut out the storm. Or was it the light within that he wished to veil?

When he returned and took his seat again, I had a chance to study his face. It was strong and handsome, but pale and drawn. The eyes were sombre, but alert, roving back and forth as if looking for something. I attributed that to the same fear that had possessed me.

Once I stretched forth a hand to speak, but he seized it and held it.

"It's all right, Nancy," he smiled. "There's nothing to fear now."

I felt stronger and less hysterical, and when I spoke my voice was almost normal.

"Are you sure that wasn't Uncle Abner's groan?" I whispered.

"Quite sure!" he laughed. "But if you want me to, I'll go back and make certain."

"Please do," I said. "I'll feel better to know that—that——"

"I understand, Nancy," he interrupted. "I'll go at once."

WHEN he left me, closing the door softly behind him, I felt an unaccountable sense of fear and loneliness stealing over me again. I shivered and leaned nearer the fire. It lighted up only a small part of the big library. The rest was cast into shadow or total darkness.

He was gone a long time. Minutes seemed like hours to me. I looked at the closed door, and then cast a furtive glance back of me.

At first I was not conscious of any-

thing unusual. Even when I saw two flashes of light reflected from the fire, I attributed it to my imagination and tried to persuade myself that it was all a case of nerves.

But as I looked the pin points of light grew larger and slowly assumed the shape and size of human eyes.

Under ordinary circumstances I would not have been greatly startled, for I prided myself upon my self-control and sanity in emergencies; but the night's experience had already unnerved me and left me trembly and touchy.

The eyes were glaring at me out of the opaque darkness in the back of the room—eyes that seemed large and uncanny, fierce, malevolent and penetrating. I stared in frozen silence, horror paralyzing my muscles.

Then, slowly, out of the gloom a human face emerged, still vague and shadowy—but the nose, the chin, the cheeks and the white, wrinkled brow were outlined with unmistakable clarity.

Some one was in the room watching me! That was my first thought, and I clutched at the couch with both hands.

Then a strange, menacing similarity with the face of the dead man in the next room made the features repulsive and startling. My heart stopped beating, my breath came in short gasps, my hands trembled, my whole body vibrated and shook.

The face moved nearer, drifting toward me, the eyes holding me with their hypnotic gaze. This movement broke the spell, and with a cry of horror I fell back upon the couch and swooned.

I could hear the echo of my own voice circling around and returning to me in little waves of sound before I lost consciousness. I know that I shrieked twice, and each time I called Jerry.

CHAPTER IV

DEEP WATER



WHEN I regained my senses I was lying on the couch, with Jerry kneeling at my side rubbing my hands and repeatedly calling my name.

The fire had burned low, the kindling had been consumed, and the dark cannel coal was sending off more smoke than flame. The room was warm now, and my clothes were no longer clinging to me in damp familiarity.

"Nancy! Nancy!" I heard Jerry calling. "Wake up, Nancy! There's nothing to hurt you."

I came to an upright position on the couch with a start and stared in the direction of the face; but it was not there. Recollection of its sinister expression made me shudder.

"What is it, dear?" Jerry asked, watching me with anxious eyes.

"The face!" I gasped. "I saw it there, looking at me."

"Oh, Jerry," I added, covering my eyes, "it was the face of—of uncle Abner!"

"Nonsense!" he said sharply. "It's your nerves, Nancy. Uncle Abner's in the dining-room. I was with him when you shrieked."

I shook my head stubbornly. Nothing could convince me that I hadn't seen the face of the dead man, with his deep-set, luminous eyes watching me.

Jerry was gentle and considerate, humoring me with silence instead of contradicting me again. And after a while I grew calm enough to talk coherently.

He listened without comment, but I could see by the half-concealed smile on his face that he was not impressed. His skepticism, unexpressed in words, but manifest in his face and eyes, irritated me.

"If it wasn't Uncle Abner," I cried finally, "then who was it? I saw a man's face and eyes. He stood back there watching me. Is there some one else in the house?"

Jerry's face grew grave and serious at this, and he answered frankly: "I don't know. I hope not. I shouldn't think the murderer would linger here long."

"Who was the murderer?" I asked quickly.

He did not answer, but got up and tiptoed across the room, looking into the dark corners and behind curtains and articles of furniture. When he returned he took his seat again and stared blankly into the fire, his chin resting on a hand.

He sat there a long time, silent and motionless, while I watched him with wondering, puzzled eyes. Once I stretched forth a hand to touch his, but drew it back, resisting the temptation to comfort him or tell him that I did not suspect him of any such crime.

"Nancy," he said finally without looking up, "I'll tell you all I know. If we're going to work together—and of course we are—we must be frank with each other."

He shot me a quick glance and smiled. But I remained silent and motionless, not returning his look.

"I came here last night to see Uncle Abner about—about—— Well, you ought to know!" he added, after breaking off with a short laugh.

"I fancy you came on the same errand, and I don't blame you. Take it all in all, we deserve it. Uncle Abner treated us miserably."

His words mystified me, but I did not let him see it, and resolutely kept my eyes from meeting his.

"I haven't been in Wildwood for fifteen years," he went on slowly, looking back at the flickering fire. "In all that time I haven't heard from

any of the family. I'm an orphan, you know, same's you."

He glanced up fleetingly and smiled. I merely nodded and shifted my position so that the light from the fire fell directly on his face and kept mine in shadow.

"Being an orphan is worse for a woman than a man, I suppose," he commented. "So I won't stress that point."

He was so evidently trying to interest me and quiet my fears that I could not forebear relaxing a little. "I've managed to live," I whispered, "but mother——"

I had to pause there, for in pretending to mourn for Nancy's mother a lump rose in my throat. Even though I had never known my own mother, I had a sacred feeling for her, which imagination if not memory could idealize. A tear stood on a lash and slowly made its way down my cheek. Jerry saw it, and reached forth and took a hand.

"Poor Nancy! I'm sorry for you. Aunt Mary was—was my favorite aunt. Next to mother I loved her the most."

"But Aunt Janice—you loved her too," I broke in.

His face hardened. "The less said about Aunt Janice the better. She suffered, too, and paid the price. Uncle Abner bent her to his will—made her a tool of his ambition. But that shouldn't have turned her against her own flesh and blood."

"Why—why——" I began in consternation, and then checked myself.

Nancy had not informed me of anything against her Aunt Janice. I suddenly felt that I was getting into deep water. It was not so easy to carry off the rôle I had assumed as I had thought it would be before I met Jerry.

AFTER a pause during which we sat almost motionless, listening to the

rattling of the blinds and the groaning of the trees outside, he raised his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"But we won't rake out the old family skeletons. Let them rest. They're none too savory. Uncle Abner was the black sheep who made misery for all. And even though he's now lying in there dead, with a knife in his heart, I cannot feel much sympathy for him.

"But the irony of it is that you mistook me for his murderer. And if I'm seen around here I may be arrested and charged with the crime. I, a murderer!"

He laughed bitterly and leaned forward until his face grew ruddy with the flames.

"Forgive me," I said, stretching out a hand. "I—I don't believe it now. It was the blood on your hands and sleeves."

"Blood! Oh, yes," he added, "I remember now. You saw it. I washed it away in the pool."

He chuckled softly.

"And you connected that with Uncle's murder? Circumstantial evidence again! They'd be damning if—if——"

His old trick of stopping in the midst of a sentence suddenly checked him again. I frowned, watching him, for I was still mystified and anxious to have him tell all.

"The blood was not fresh," I remarked. "I saw that. It was dried——"

"It should have been," he laughed.

"I got it the day before in Jackson's slaughter-house. You remember Jackson's, or don't you? Perhaps not—you left Wildwood early.

"I strolled down there to see if Jackson still owned it. They were slaughtering a beef. I was curious and stood too near. The blood spurted out and covered me."

The explanation seemed plausible. But it was strange that he had gone

a whole day and night without cleaning it off his hands and sleeves. A slight doubt rose in my mind, but I resolutely suppressed it.

"Why did you come to Swamp Hollow?" I asked, speaking quickly to cover my confusion.

"For the same reason you did, I fancy. Confess now."

He was looking at me, smiling and waiting for a reply. Instead of answering, I averted my face and grew very red. Evidently he misunderstood, for he laughed lightly and turned back to the fire.

"Well," he observed after a long pause, "uncle's death has made it easier for us. We can search the house together. There won't be any interruption; but by morning we must be gone. It would never do for either of us to be seen lurking around here."

"You think," I gasped, "they would—would suspect me of—of—"

"They would suspect any one," he cut in. "These country detectives are not very shrewd. They'd jump at the first clue they stumbled across. Perhaps they wouldn't suspect you if I were here."

"No, that would be a little too much. It's the two of us together that would arouse suspicion. My presence would involve you."

"I shouldn't have returned. I shouldn't have returned. I should have gone on. I was fleeing, frightened out of my wits, when I met you. Did I look frightened?"

Again I did not answer. The whole conversation had puzzled me, and I wished myself out of the whole affair. Why had I undertaken such a foolish adventure?

I looked around wildly for a plausible way out of my predicament. I had not introduced myself as Nancy Lee, but I had let him think I was his cousin, which amounted to almost the same thing.

There was some mystery that Nancy had kept concealed from me. Or perhaps she had not thought enough of it to feel that it needed to be explained. And now my ignorance was causing me endless confusion. But the confession that sprang to my lips was checked by Jerry, who went on quietly:

"I came back to Swamp Hollow after these many years to see Uncle Abner. I hoped to come to a settlement with him. If not—then——"

He stopped and waved a hand threateningly—but seeing my sudden start and frown he smiled and shook his head.

"No, I don't mean I was going to do him bodily harm," he added. "But I intended to get hold of the Dallas Heart, or at least to make a search for it. I felt sure Uncle kept it hidden in Swamp Hollow."

The Dallas Heart! What did he mean? My effort to solve the riddle only increased my confusion. But still I held back my confession, anxious to learn more about the mystery. My curiosity was now aroused, and I turned to him with a luring smile.

"You were going to burglarize the house? If not a murderer, then a burglar?"

"I suppose it would be called that," he admitted. "But stealing what belongs to you is no crime, is it?"

"No," I replied, "but—what of me?"

He studied the flames a moment in silence, and then glanced up and smiled.

"Of course, your right in it is equal to mine," he said slowly, "and I would share it with you. Judge Dallas left it as a dowry to Betty and Mary, Janice having relinquished all right to it when she took Swamp Hollow."

"Betty!" I breathed softly, looking inquiringly at him.

"Yes—my mother, your Aunt Betty!"

OH, HOW stupid of Nancy not to have made a clearer and more detailed explanation of the family tree! She had not even mentioned Aunt Betty. I began to feel that I knew less than nothing of the Lees and the Longwoods of Wildwood and Swamp Hollow. But by degrees I was being enlightened by Jerry, and I encouraged him to go on.

"When you came here you found Uncle Abner, and he refused to listen to you?" I asked.

A hard, ironic expression came into face.

"I found him," he said steadily after a long pause, "but not as you think."

He moved uneasily and glanced around the darkened room. The thunder and lightning had passed, and only the wind remained to remind us of the recent storm. The room was no longer intermittently lighted up with vivid flashes, but remained clothed in sombre darkness save for the fitful flames from the coal.

"I found him," he continued in a low voice, "in there—dead—stabbed to the heart—weltering in his own blood just as you saw him!"

"Oh!" I shuddered, clasping my hands.

"It was a terrible sight," he went on slowly. "It completely unnerved me. He had only been recently killed. The body was barely cold. The murderer had had hardly time enough to get away."

Again he glanced nervously back of him and, recalling the sinister face I had seen in the back of the room, I followed his eyes. We sat silent, looking intently, clasping hands for mutual courage.

"You see any one?" he asked in a whisper.

"No, but I did."

"Tell me—what did he look like?"

"The face and eyes," I shuddered, "were—were those of Uncle Abner."

"Nonsense! That's your imagination! How could he be in here, with his body out there dead?"

I shook my head without comment. I could not explain, but I was sure I had not been deceived.

He drew a deep sigh after a while.

"We're letting things get on our nerves," he added. "Next we'll see ghosts and spirits."

He got up and crossed to the window, jerking the curtain aside hastily and snapping up the shade. He peered out a moment, and then returned to his seat by the fire.

"It's a terrible night outside," he murmured. "The rain's stopped, but the wind's worse. It's a regular hurricane. Not a very pleasant night to spend in Swamp Hollow."

He smiled grimly and dropped on his stool again, as though he were very tired. There was a clock ticking somewhere in the room, and we listened to it, counting the seconds. It had an uncanny sound that punctuated the silence between each blast of wind outside.

"I'll stop that clock!" Jerry muttered finally. "Where is it? It gets on my nerves. Uncle Abner always declared it wouldn't stop until he died. He wound it up faithfully every week. I don't believe it's stopped in fifty years."

"But if he's dead why doesn't it stop?" I asked fearfully.

He turned and glared at me as if I had suggested something unpleasant. Then seeing my pale, frightened face his own relaxed.

"Poor Nancy," he whispered. "You shouldn't have gotten into this thing. I wish you hadn't come."

"Tell me," I said steadily, "what you did after finding uncle's body?"

"What I did!" he repeated. "Why I—I was so frightened that I forgot all about my errand. I was panic-stricken and ran. Yes, I literally ran

out of the house into the swamp. I was so excited that I didn't notice which way I was going.

"The result was," he added, smiling, "that I got turned around. I was bewildered and lost in the swamp."

"And then you found me?"

"Yes, then I found you. I heard you sobbing, and for a moment I was too stupefied to speak. I wondered if I weren't dreaming. Your face seemed familiar, and yet it didn't. I must have acted queerly."

I smiled, recalling the meeting and its effect on me. Then suddenly my heart nearly ceased beating.

A groan came from the other room—clear and distinct, a repetition of the first one we had heard.

CHAPTER V

MEMORIES



BETWEEN the mysterious groan and the face I had seen in the darkness, I was reduced to a condition of utter helplessness. And when Jerry leaped to his feet I caught his hand and pleaded with him not to leave me.

Swamp Hollow had so got on my nerves that reason and common sense no longer swayed my words or actions. I dreaded being left alone, and yet I wanted Jerry to investigate the next room from which the groan had come.

Jerry was nearly as excited as I, but perhaps in a different way. I was convinced that there was something supernatural about the face and the groan, and the condition of my nerves prevented me from casting the feeling off; but Jerry was thinking differently.

"There's some one in the dining-room," he whispered. "Wait here!"

"No! No!" I cried hysterically. "It's Uncle Abner! He's not dead or—or——"

I could not finish, for phrased in words it seemed ridiculous. Spirits and ghosts are not accepted seriously today by any except weak-minded creatures or by the investigating committees of psychical and spiritualistic bodies, and I credited myself with belonging to neither.

"Nonsense," he cried, using the same expression for the third or fourth time to contradict me. "Don't be silly, Nancy. I'll leave the door open."

"But if I should see the face again," I began, shuddering and pointing to the back of the room. "If I do I shall die of fright."

He glanced judiciously around and finally said: "If you see it, call me. I'll come back instantly."

Before I could reply, he had disengaged his hand. I jumped to my feet to follow, but my legs suddenly lost their power of locomotion. I sank back on the couch with a little moan.

I heard Jerry's cat-like steps and saw the shadow of his form creeping toward the door leading into the death room. Like one in a horrible dream I saw and heard the door open.

The silence that followed was harder to endure than a babel of strange sounds, and as if to intensify it there came a lull in the wind outside and the blinds ceased to rattle.

All over the house a strange hush followed. The branches of the trees no longer swayed or creaked, and the scraping of a bare limb that had beat a steady tattoo against the side of the house stopped miraculously.

It was uncanny, yet it would have been perfectly understandable if I'd stopped to reason out the cause; but in a state of fear one forgets everything except what the imagination conjures up. Even the dropping of a pin would have shocked me; the slamming of a door or window would have caused me to faint. And I'm not the fainting kind—far from it!

AFTER what seemed an eternity of time, I heard Jerry moving around in the next room. Round and round his steps seemed to circulate—now near the door, then past it and back again. What could he be doing?

In the effort to find an answer to this question I forgot some of my fear, and I listened intently to every footfall. Once or twice I was tempted to call him, but I restrained myself.

I caught myself counting his steps—one, two, three, four, five. . . .

I counted up to fifty, and then stopped. The last round had brought him near the door again, and this time they did not retreat as before in the endless circle.

He was returning, and a great weight was lifted from my mind when I caught the shadow of his form silhouetted against the opposite wall by the flicker of the fire.

"Jerry!" I called faintly.

"Coming, Nancy!" he replied.

He did not come straight toward me, but first made a circuit of the room, stopping at each window to lift the shade and peer out. I watched him apprehensively.

Then he came and dropped on his stool and stared blankly into the fire.

"What was it, Jerry?" I asked fearfully.

He looked at me for a moment and then shook his head.

"It was Uncle Abner?" I added inquiringly.

"I don't know. I can't say," he muttered. "But it's queer—very queer."

"What's queer?" I demanded sharply, pulling at his sleeve. "Answer me, Jerry! Don't keep me waiting."

"I—I wish you hadn't come to this beastly place!" he blurted out half angrily. "It's bewitched or something."

"Haunted!" I exclaimed, supplying the right word for him.

"Haunted!" he sneered. "There's no such thing as a haunted house. You can't make me believe——"

Again that tantalizing break in a sentence.

"What did you find?" I asked almost fiercely. "Tell me! I must know."

"What did I find?" he asked, laughing in a way that grated on my nerves. "I didn't find anything, Nancy! The room was empty!"

"Empty! You mean no one was in it except Uncle Abner?"

"No!" he replied, almost brutally. "I mean that he wasn't there either. He's gone! There's nothing left but the pool of blood in which he lay."

That was the supreme test of my nerves, and I should have cried out or fainted. But, strangely, I did neither. I was cold and shaky, but my mind was clear. I was surprised at the calmness of my own voice.

"If he's not there, then where is he?"

"How should I know?" came the irritable reply. "Got up and walked away, or flew away! Hanged if I don't believe he had two lives! He was dead before. Now he's——"

"No!" he added, raising his voice to a shout. "I won't believe anything so silly! He was dead, and dead he'll stay. Come on, Nancy, we've lost too much time now! We'll search for the Dallas Heart, and get out of here before morning! Let Uncle's body get up and crawl away. It shan't hold us back. Come!"

"Where to?" I gasped, shrinking back.

"Where to? Everywhere! Upstairs—downstairs—into the garret and into the cellar! Wherever there's a likely hiding place for the Dallas Heart we'll look. Come!"

ANYTHING was preferable to sitting there, listening to the wind and the creaking of floors and walls so common in an old house on a stormy night.

I got up quickly. Any kind of action would help to keep my mind from brooding on the supernatural and the uncanny.

"Remember it's half yours," Jerry continued, taking my hand. "Judge Dallas left it to your mother and mine, and Uncle Abner stole it. He had no right to it, but it was worth a fortune, and he couldn't keep his hands off it."

How I wished he would explain what the Dallas Heart really was. I was beginning to think it was some sort of priceless jewel, but the name puzzled me. I didn't like to betray my ignorance by asking.

"You must remember, Jerry," I said, "that I was young, very young, when mother left Wildwood, and I've never been back."

"That's so, Nancy! I'd forgotten, poor girl. I'm sorry for you."

With that he put an arm around my waist and drew me nearer in the dark. Perhaps it was a cousinly kiss he gave me, but it tingled and started all sorts of emotions in my breast.

I pushed him away; but he only laughed lightly.

"Well, come, we must begin the search," he added. "But what's that?"

There was a peculiar grating noise as if some one were pushing aside sliding doors or dragging a heavy weight over the floor above. Jerry paused, all his laughter gone.

"If Uncle Abner isn't really dead," he muttered, "we won't have much of a chance to find it."

"How could he be dead if he isn't in the library?" I asked tremulously.

"It is a mystery," he breathed softly. "I don't know what to think of it. But"—half angrily—"I won't be

frightened! Dead or alive, he's got to disgorge. That's what I came to Swamp Hollow for. Now we'll begin in his bedroom. I know where it is—on the next floor."

He produced an electric flashlight and flashed its rays ahead of us. We were in the hall, a big, square, old-fashioned hall, with the front door on one side and a winding stairway on the other. It was so cold and drafty that I shivered.

Jerry was familiar with the place from childhood, and he began ascending the steps, with me close behind him.

"We'll get away from that dining-room," he remarked, trying to comfort me. "It was a bit gruesome, with uncle dead on the floor."

"But if he's gone," I whispered, "we may find him somewhere else—in his bedroom, maybe."

He paused again at this.

"I hadn't thought of that. Well," grimly, "if he's dead he can't hurt us, and if he's alive he's still an old, feeble man. I don't think we need to worry."

Nevertheless, he was constantly watchful and on his guard as if expecting to meet someone. On the upper landing he stopped long enough to look around him.

His light flashed on a mammoth oil painting at one side, and when he saw me watching it he explained:

"It's Uncle Abner! You remember it?"

No, I didn't remember it, but the face was one not easily to be forgotten. It was that of a middle-aged man with dark, brooding eyes; a high forehead, thick lips, and a square chin. Greed was stamped on every feature. It was a hard face, and I could imagine the heart of flint which went with it.

"THAT was painted before he stole the Dallas fortune," Jerry went on.

"He was half-way decent up to that time. After that he was a devil. He broke my mother's heart and drove yours away into exile.

"Of course it was all untrue, Nancy, about your father being a thief and drunkard. But Uncle Abner made the story sound so plausible that everybody believed it. He would have been lodged in jail if he hadn't fled with your mother, taking you with them."

Nancy's ignorance of the real trouble was made clear to me now. She hadn't told me all the history of the family feud because her mother had withheld it from her out of a sense of pride or reticence.

"And Aunt Betty?" I breathed in a whisper.

Jerry's face grew as hard and flinty as that of the oil portrait before us.

"You know about that, don't you?" he said in a troubled voice. "Or were you too young?"

"I was too young to understand, Jerry," I ventured, hoping to get the details from him.

"Then I'll tell you so that, even if I did come here with murder in my heart, you'll know I had some justification."

He paused, holding his breath, while we both stared at the painting on the wall.

"He ruined mother's life by false scandal," he said in a hard voice. "Oh, he was a past-master at that. He could scheme and plan, and then at the right moment strike.

"Mother was high-spirited, and she accused him of lying and betraying her to the scandal-mongers of the village. But what did he care? He mocked and laughed at her."

I pressed his hand gently in sympathy when he paused.

"Poor, dear Aunt Betty!" I murmured.

He sighed, and then went on.

"She demanded her share of the estate. She wanted to leave Wildwood forever; but he would give her nothing. Everything was in his hands—even the Dallas Heart!"

"Yes? And she didn't get that?" I encouraged.

A smile of triumph came into the upturned face.

"Yes, she got it out of his safe and fled with it. It belonged to her—or half of it did. It wasn't stealing. She fled through the swamp with me, and—and——"

He stopped again to wipe from his forehead the perspiration which unpleasant memories had caused to settle there.

"I was only a kid then," he added in a whisper. "I didn't know what it was all about. I got my first unpleasant impression of Uncle Abner that day.

"He discovered the loss of the Dallas Heart before mother could get out of the swamp. He pursued and overtook us near the pool where I found you. He accused mother of the theft, and she was too proud to deny it.

"Then—then—they struggled, and Uncle Abner got it away from her."

I sighed in sympathy for the boy and mother of long ago, as well as for the man by my side.

"After that," he resumed gently, "mother lost heart. Because of the scandal Uncle had started in Wildwood she would never go out. She brooded at Swamp Hollow or wandered around alone in the swamp. Sometimes she took me with her, and again she would go alone.

"As I recall it now she was a broken-hearted woman. And then one day—one day—she was missing."

I caught his arm, shivering slightly with apprehension. He was quiet for so long that I wondered if he had forgotten that his story was left unfinished.

"You found her?" I asked.

"Yes—her body—floating in the pool where we met."

"Oh!" I gasped, drawing back and shuddering.

"Dear mother," he continued, speaking more to himself than to me, "nobody ever knew whether it was an accident or the act of a broken-hearted, discouraged woman."

"Let us think it was an accident, Jerry," I said gently.

"Yes, I've always tried to think so. I won't think anything else! Mother was proud and high-spirited, and not a coward. She would never have taken her life. She had me to live for."

I nodded gravely, and then asked: "And you, Jerry? Did you continue to live on at Swamp Hollow?"

"Yes, and for a time Uncle Abner was kind to me. Mother's death upset him, I fancy, and he tried to make amends by treating me decently.

"But it didn't last. As he grew older he changed. He followed me around, browbeat me, treated me as if I were something alien. And in the end I learned to hate him. It lasted for years, and then when I was old enough I ran away.

"The rest," he added, smiling grimly, "is another story. But hard as life was to me it was pleasanter than it would have been living here."

When he stopped we stood side by side looking up at the picture—Jerry with brooding eyes and I with strange absorption and curiosity.

Looking down at us, as if he had been listening to our conversation, Uncle Abner of the portrait seemed alive and conscious of our presence. As in all oil paintings, the eyes seemed to follow us with a life-like stare that was disquieting.

Then, suddenly, the picture quivered, and with a little scream I drew back.

CHAPTER VI

DARK LINES

JERRY started and looked at me with alarm in his eyes, and when he saw how white and frightened I was he took my hand.

"What is it, Nancy?" he asked gently. "Did the story upset you? I shouldn't have told you such a gruesome tale on a night like this."

"No! No!" I cried. "It was the picture!"

"The picture! Oh, Uncle Abner's eyes frightened you!"

He smiled grimly, and added: "Well, it wouldn't be the first time they had frightened a person. But——"

I caught his hand in both of mine.

"It moved, Jerry!" I cried, shivering. "The picture moved! I saw it!"

He started and glanced up at the oil portrait, flashed the electric torch up and down it, and then half pityingly turned to me.

"Whatever Uncle Abner's malignant power may have been in real life, Nancy," he said smilingly, "I don't think he could make his picture move. You're excited and unnerved. We'll go and not look at it any more."

His words seemed reassuring, and I tried to make myself believe I had been deceived. It might have been the wind that had agitated the canvas.

The frame itself was of massive size, and was set in the wall as a permanent fixture. That certainly could not have been moved by the wind.

I gave it one last, shuddering glance and followed Jerry through a door into another room. This had been Abner Longwood's bed-chamber for nearly half a century.

It was a room of generous size like all the others in the house, but it had a dead, musty odor that was not pleasant. I halted on the threshold, dread-

ing to enter, but Jerry crossed to a big desk and opened it, rummaging around in the drawers and pigeon-holes.

"Never can tell where Uncle Abner would keep such a priceless thing as the Dallas Heart," he said. "But I'll ransack everything in here first, and then try another room."

He stopped and glanced at his watch.

"A little after midnight," he murmured. "We've got several hours before morning."

I had lost interest in the search, and I'm afraid I didn't prove a very helpful confederate; but Jerry proceeded with systematic swiftness to go through everything, and in a short time he had finished the bed-chamber.

"It isn't here!" he said in a voice of disappointment. "Not unless he has a wall safe," he added, glancing eagerly around.

There was apparently no wall safe, and he finally gave it up.

RANSACKING a big house like Swamp Hollow was no simple matter, for besides the number and size of the rooms it was stored with an immense amount of old truck, accumulated through the years and left undisturbed by the owner.

Many times Jerry was discouraged and paused to shake his head. But a new and likely hiding place would occur to him and he would renew his search with enthusiasm.

I kept close to his side. I wouldn't let him get more than a few feet away. The horror of the place frightened me. I knew that somewhere Uncle Abner might be lurking around, either dead or alive, and I didn't know in which state I dreaded to meet him most.

I was surprised that Jerry had taken the disappearance of the corpse so lightly. The mystery had not been

explained, and at times I stared at him in wonder. How could he go on calmly searching the house when he knew that somewhere around the body of his dead uncle was concealed?

Once I asked him: "Jerry, we must find Uncle Abner! If he didn't crawl away somebody else must—must be in the house."

He started and stared at me.

"Why do you say that? Have you seen anyone?"

"No, but that face I saw and the eyes——"

"You said they were Uncle Abner's."

"Yes, but I may have been mistaken. I was greatly excited."

"Guess you were, but I don't believe any one else is in the house."

"Then where is Uncle Abner?" I cried sharply.

"Look here, Nancy," he replied, taking a seat on a pile of stuff he had overhauled, "don't let your nerves get the better of you. Nothing's going to happen. See, I'm armed."

He exhibited a small automatic and held it toward me.

"I can defend myself. Uncle was stone dead when I examined him. I'm sure of that. But when I went back into the dining-room he was gone. There was the pool of blood to show he'd been killed, but that was all."

"Now the rest I can't explain. Either Uncle Abner wasn't dead and crawled away, or another helped him or dragged his body away, or—or something like a miracle happened. You can take your choice."

"But why don't you look for him?" I demanded.

He grinned and nodded his head.

"I am! I'm searching the house for him as much as I am for that Dallas Heart. But I didn't like to tell you so. I thought it would frighten you."

It did add to my fear, but at the same time it made things plainer and

thus easier for me. Thereafter, every time he opened a closet or pulled off a mattress from a bed or looked in a dark corner I hung back in a fever of trepidation, expecting to see him find the dead body we had left in the dining-room.

"It's a big mystery," I heard him mutter more than once. "There's something uncanny about it, but I'll find the explanation of it."

I was even less of a help in finding the corpse than in searching for the Dallas Heart, and I hung back more and more. Finally, after going over nearly every part of the house, Jerry paused in the upper hall to wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

"I've been everywhere except in the cellar and the tower-room," he said. "I think I'll try the latter next."

There was a short flight of stairs leading up to a huge tower that surmounted the top of the house, and when Jerry opened the door I felt a sharp blast of cold air strike me. I stepped back, for with the blast of wind came a dreadful moan and shriek.

"It's nothing but the wind," he assured me. "The skylight's broken and the wind comes through it. You stay below. I won't be gone long. It's a small room, and it's cold and wet up there."

"Don't leave me!" I pleaded.

"It's only for a few minutes. Don't be afraid, Nancy."

I STOOD in a dismal blue funk while he climbed the stairs. He was flashing the light ahead of him so that I could see the upper part of the stairway, but the part nearest me grew darker and darker as he ascended.

I didn't want to display my weakness any more than I had already done, and I struggled mightily to control myself, though I was shivering and gulping and clasp- and unclasp- ing my hands.

Once I was impelled by an unreasoning sense of fear to rush pell-mell after him. But I knew that if I gave way to the feeling I would become a gibbering idiot. I bit my lip until the blood was drawn to check my panic.

When Jerry reached the top of the stairs and turned a corner to enter the tower, I was left in total darkness. Even the occasional flash of his light was now denied me.

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. I could not have followed now if I had wanted to without stumbling blindly through the opaque darkness.

I had been standing a few feet away from the door, and I clutched at it now for support. But in the darkness my hands missed it.

I took a step forward, but the door was not there. I had missed it in some way, and in the darkness I had become turned around.

A new terror seized me. I had to find the door and the stairs. I stumbled forward, this way and that, but my hands touched nothing but empty air.

Nothing is so disquieting to the mind in the dark as the feeling that you have lost your bearings. Deep, yawning pitfalls seem to rise up before you, and you dare not move for fear of falling in.

That was exactly my condition. I knew that I was in the upper hall, but that was all. I had no way of measuring the distance I had traversed, and the fear that I might be near the head of the main stairway, and that a false step might carry me over it, checked further progress. I stood perfectly still, hoping and praying that Jerry would soon finish his search of the tower-room and return to me.

I was as quiet as a mouse, scarcely breathing, but with eyes and ears alert to any sound. The great silence of the hall contrasted eerily with the banging and creaking of outside blinds and clapboards.

Now and then a step would squeak or a beam groan as the whole house vibrated under the force of the wind. Each time I started and clutched at my heart with both hands.

Would Jerry never come? How long could I endure the terrible suspense? If a mouse had crossed my path at that moment I could not have jumped or shrieked, so paralyzed was I with dread of the unknown.

THAT is why, when the uncanny thing happened, that I did not call Jerry's name or turn and run. I was in a cataleptic state, seeing and hearing everything, but unable to move a muscle. No one struggling in a hideous nightmare could have suffered worse mental and physical torture.

The terrifying phenomena that had startled me began by the appearance of a soft, subdued light, which at first I thought was an optical illusion. But as it persisted and grew in power I knew it was a reality.

It was directly in front of me, a few feet above my head. If I had reached out I could almost have touched it.

It was not simply a white light, nor entirely a red light; it had all the prismatic colors of the rainbow, but not blended and arranged as in the prism. Darker lines crossed and criss-crossed the lighter shades in the most irregular and haphazard way.

Emerging from the blank wall of darkness, it seemed to have a supernatural origin. I stared at it, fascinated and curious as well as horrified. Stronger and stronger it grew until its glow reflected on my face and threw the hall into partial light.

It had been vague and formless at first, a colored light without meaning. But now it began to assume definite shape. The darker lines ran into each other, leaving the lighter ones merely for the background. Two circles particularly held my startled

gaze. These grew larger and stronger until they began to resemble human eyes.

Then memory of the face that had appeared to me in the library, emerging from the black surroundings as if by magic, gave me a distinct jolt. Was that same face coming again to terrify and threaten me?

I watched the eyes as they appeared, then the nose, the mouth, the forehead, the chin and the hair, until the face was complete, all cast in a dim glow as if a light were shining from behind.

Suddenly the light became sharper and clearer, casting a path of light clear across the hall. It revealed to me my surroundings with startling clearness.

I was standing before the oil portrait of Abner Longwood, gazing up at the hard, flinty face and eyes! The whole picture stood out in sharp relief.

To my dazed mind a certain relief came. It was not the face I had seen before, but that of the oil painting. In some strange, miraculous manner it had been lighted up either by a reflected light or one from behind it.

It must have been the latter, for there was no other light in the hall. Every part of it was cast in deep gloom except the spot where the shadows were lifted a little by the reflection from the picture.

It was a miracle, an uncanny demonstration of the supernatural. The portrait had lighted up so that every feature was clear and distinct.

The effect on me was to deepen my superstitious fear. I could not explain the mystery, except that in some amazing way a light had appeared from behind the canvas, slowly illuminating the features until they glowed with lifelike clearness. The darker lines that had seemed so irregular and haphazard had fallen into shape, no longer vague or uncertain.

The artist's paint had resisted or reflected the light at first, according to the density of the pigment. But now, like a picture puzzle, the lines had all fallen into position, revealing the oil portrait of Abner Longwood.

I STOOD looking up at it with frightened and fascinated eyes, vaguely wondering how it had happened, when suddenly it began to move. The whole portrait was stepping out of the frame toward me!

I think that then I uttered a muffled cry, or at least it seemed so to me. But apparently it was like the stifled scream of a cataleptic patient.

Slowly but steadily the portrait moved toward me, and instead of running or calling Jerry I stood in helpless silence watching it. I knew I ought to scream, but for the life of me I could not. I had lost all control of my voice and limbs.

The huge oil portrait, at least six by ten feet, came within a foot of my face, and then it slowly moved to my left. A sharp ray of light came from one side, revealing a space between the frame and the wall.

Even to my bewildered senses a swift explanation of the phenomenon came to me.

The picture had simply swung to one side noiselessly as if its hinges were freshly oiled, and not, as I first

had thought, straight toward me.

The next moment a dazzling ray of light hit me squarely in the face. It came from an electric torch which had supplied the light which had come from behind the picture and made it glow with such uncanny beauty.

I was blinded for a moment and had to close my eyes. When I opened them again the light was still there, but behind it I began to make out the dim outlines of a face and figure.

Was the figure alive, or was it another supernatural phenomenon? There came a distinct grunt, and then I knew that it was not a spirit or ghost.

It was Abner Longwood in flesh and blood, standing in a hole in the wall that the portrait had cleverly concealed, holding in one hand the electric torch, and in the other a knife. He was staring at me with baleful, wicked eyes.

But there was surprise and fear in them also. My appearance had startled him almost as much as the whole thing had amazed and terrified me.

Recognition of him proved the one thing needful to arouse me from my trance. I found my voice and screamed.

"Jerry! Jerry!" I cried, and fell forward almost in a swoon.





The Perfect Alibi

By IRVING BRANT

“**L**O, Jerry, how's ever'-thing?”
“Fine an' dandy, Simpkins. When'd you get back?”

Jerry, a steely-eyed man of thirty-five, accompanied by two slender, pasty-faced youths and an overdressed woman, walked to the second table of the Turquoise Cafe, twitched the soiled tablecloth onto the floor and sat down amid a blare of jazz.

Mr. Simpkins, his large, blonde face glowing with pride, leaned confidentially toward Bill Patton.

Mr. Simpkins, you may know, is president of the Simpkins Motor Specialty Co., and second vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce.

“Know that fellow?” asked the leader of the community in a stage whisper.

A long puff at his cigar gave time for the question to gather impressiveness.

“That's Jerry Cooney.”

“Head of the Cooney gang?”

“The very same.”

Another deep pull at the cigar.

“Friend of yours?”

“Well, I know him. Never met him in church, of course—ha, ha, ha—but—well! Other two fellows are brothers. Newspapers call 'em the Bump-off Twins. Worst killers in this part of the country—those birds.”

“How do you happen to know a bunch like that?”

Mr. Simpkins removed his cigar and allowed a delicious draught to penetrate his larynx.

“I know all sorts of people—all sorts of people. You know. But it was odd how I got acquainted with Jerry. Remember my Pierce Arrow was stolen three months ago? Well, I notified the police, but they hadn't got started when somebody calls me on the telephone.

“‘Hello,’ he says. ‘I hear your car was stolen.’

“‘Yes.’

“‘Well, this is Jerry Cooney.’

“Of course, I knew who he was because the papers were full of that Winchester mail robbery. These

birds did it, but they'll never get 'em. But I just says:

"'Yes, what is it, Mr. Cooney?"

"'Well,' says he, 'I think I can locate that car for you.'—Uses good English, he does—'I'll have a couple of the boys scout around town.'

"'Go ahead,' I says. 'All I want is the car.'

"Well, in about two hours I walked out of the office and there was my boy—Junior, you know—fine boy, Junior is—just parking my car. He says a young fellow drove it up to our door, then climbed into another car and drove off, yelling back that Jerry Cooney sent a present to the old man."

"What do you suppose he did it for?" asked Patton.

"Oh, just to be sociable, I guess. The next time I was in here he came up and introduced himself, and dog-goned if he didn't give me a card that cut my liquor bill fifteen per cent just by showing it to my own bootlegger. Improved the quality, too.

"Bill, it don't pay to be too particular in this li'l old world. Nice fellow, too, Jerry is, even if he has got some notches on his gun."

AT THE other table, now stocked with various sorts of refreshments, Mr. Simpkins was the subject of conversation.

"Who's the big mug?" asked the lady of the party.

The head of the Cooney gang expanded visibly, but spoke with an air of nonchalance:

"Oh, just a friend of mine. Simpkins, president of the Chamber of Commerce."

"Ain't Jerry got the swell friends?" laughed the lady.

One of the Bump-off Twins, for whom all the police except those in the immediate neighborhood were frantically searching, now cast a speculative glance at Mr. Simpkins.

He looked like a good market for Liberty bonds—of which, since the Winchester mail robbery, the Cooney gang had a decided surplus.

"Can you hang any paper on him?" inquired Brother Bump-off.

"Not him. He's a real guy, that fellow, biggest man in town. I just know him in a sociable way."

"Aw, Jerry, can it. We got a few friends, too," came from the other Bump-off. "Whatcha goin' to do with him?"

"Not a thing. I said he was my friend."

"Gotta show me. I bet if you go over there he'd fade out."

"Go on, Jerry, let's see how he likes you," urged the lady, half jeering, half admiring.

Jerry went.

"HERE he comes," whispered the second vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce.

"Hello, Jerry, have a chair. Mr. Cooney, my friend Mr. Patton. Waiter, 'nother glass. I was just telling Bill how you brought back my car."

"Aw, that wasn't nothin'! I knowed where it was likely to be left after that—well, I had read in the paper there was a little excitement at 6400 Landon Boulevard that night."

"What was the excitement?" asked Bill Patton carelessly.

"Well, I read in the paper that unknown parties had bumped a guy that was going to the roadhouse after a crap game where he won \$1,200."

"My God!" said Mr. Simpkins. "Did they use my car for a murder?"

"Well," the gangster replied, "I don't know as you would call it murder. Sort of an accident, I suppose. Anyhow, the guy would a-been a damn sight better off if he hadn't won that \$1,200."

Mr. Simpkins let out an appreciative chuckle that could not fail to

reach the Bump-off Twins and their fair companion. Jerry Cooney grinned pleasantly.

"Say," the gangster went on, "if I could see you some time I could put you onto something pretty nice."

"Go ahead, Jerry," beamed the president of the Simpkins Motor Specialty Co. "Bill's a good sport."

"How'd you like to get a nice fur for your wife, broadtail, at about one-third wholesale price?"

"Well, I don't know. Anything wrong with it?"

"Say, it's a beaut. You couldn't touch it for two thousand on the Avenue. That's retail, of course. You can get it for \$450."

Mr. Simpkins tapped the table reflectively.

"I'm due for a fur," he said, "but I want to get this straight. I can't go into anything shady—don't mind it myself, but you know my position. Is this fur stolen?"

"As I tell you, Mr. Simpkins, I'm not sellin' it myself. All I do is put you next. Far as I know it ain't been stolen, but I do guarantee this: it came from a place a thousand miles off and there won't be a question asked."

Jerry grinned slyly.

"The dealer didn't quite like the way it was made, so he had it changed a bit. And you know that nobody is going to ask questions about the furs that are worn by Mrs. Cornelius Simpkins, are they?"

"Hardly," mused the second vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce. "Four hundred fifty, you say?"

"Yes, and it's worth a cool two grand. Here's the way I look at it, Mr. Simpkins. Somebody is goin' to buy it, so it might as well be one person as another. And you don't know how they got it any more than I do. Of course, we can't give you an abstract of title goin' back to the

original seal or mink or whatever thing the coat is made of."

"All right, Jerry, I'll have a look at it."

Then, turning to Patton: "Want to go along?"

Patton lied.

"Don't know a darn thing about furs, but I'll go along if you want me to."

Mr. Simpkins agreed to meet the head of the Cooney gang at 315 Second street at 4 o'clock the next afternoon, and after a hearty handshake the two men resumed their relative levels in society.

"MY LORD, Jerry, you sure got that bird on your calling list," remarked his lady friend.

"I know all the big guns," Cooney boasted, adding with shrewd pomposity, "that's one reason why I lead the gang. I've got influence, I have."

"What about hanging the paper on him?" asked the Bump-off boy with the Liberty bond complex.

"Say, didn't I tell you he was just my friend?" answered the indignant chieftain. "That guy don't handle no sour dough. He's a millionaire. Say, he owns the First National Bank all to hisself, an' he's president of the Chamber of Commerce an' got a mortgage on the Y. M. C. A. Me and him pals together."

BILL PATTON looked quizzically at his friend as they left the Turquoise Cafe.

"Of course," he smiled, "you need a bargain like that."

"Maybe I don't," Simpkins came back, "but I wouldn't be giving money to charity if I hadn't learned to grab a bargain when I see it."

"I don't doubt that," Patton persisted. "But did you see how the rest of them worshipped him when he went back? You're helping to

keep a murderer in control of that bunch of dope-hounds."

"Say, what do you do for a living, sing in the choir? All I do is take the world as I find it. Trouble is, the police force is rotten. If the police would do their duty, we wouldn't have any gangs. What time did he say—four o'clock tomorrow?"

MIDNIGHT was three hours past. The jazz orchestra had gone home and a lone waiter was asleep in the kitchen of the Turquoise Cafe.

The last party of noisy revelers was going out of the door, and Jerry Cooney and his friends were sitting silent after their latest bottle, when a young man came into the cafe, bringing with him a girl with a machined complexion and run-down heels.

The young man's face was flushed, his cane hit several chairs at once, and he half reeled as he walked beside his wooden-visaged companion.

"Jus' want a bite," he said to the waiter who should have been there, but was not. "Jus' a bite an' a bottle, an' give this lady the bes' seat in the house. I'm Cornelius Simpkins—Cornelius Simpkins, Jr.—you know me—an' I can pay for all I order."

It was some time before Cornelius Simpkins, Jr., got his eyes firmly fixed upon the party at the nearby table.

"Say, there's—Bump-off Twins," he said, trying to stand. "Dad says—worst killers—dad knows whole gang—nice fellers—nice fellers. I know 'em. Those guys—brought dad's car back. I saw 'em.

"Dad says—rather know that gang—than Coolidge. Big men all know gangs—kick to it—some kick—know-in' gang. I know 'em—more'n they think. I'll tell 'em—tell 'em what I know."

He rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Neal, for God's sake sit down," cried the girl.

"Come on—make you 'quainted," responded Cornelius Simpkins, Jr., pushing the girl ahead of him.

"Lo, fellers—Bump-off—'lo. 'Member me? 'Member—stole dad's car—Simpkins—Pierce Arrow—brought it back? I was there."

"Sure. We know you, buddy," volunteered one of the Bump-offs. "Sit down. Have a drink."

"I know—both of you. Better be glad—I kep' still. Got—close mouth—I have. 'S all right. You're dad's frien's."

"Neal, come on back," whimpered the girl.

"Shut up, kid. Let him talk," ordered Jerry Cooney.

"Saw you fellows—bring the car," went on Cornelius Simpkins, Jr. "Saw you 'gain—goin'—bat like hell—out o' Winchester—night o' robbery."

Jerry Cooney sat like a statue of chilled steel. The Bump-off Twins looked from the drunken boy to the expressionless face of their leader. The overdressed woman laughed hysterically, and the painted girl stood in frozen horror.

Cornelius Simpkins, Jr., laughed and slapped the gang leader on the shoulder.

"S all right, Jerry. Good sports—dad's frien's—I'm sport too—won't tell—trus' me—what's—mail robbery—'mong frien's?"

"Neal!" shrieked the girl. "Shut up! For God's sake shut up!"

The nearer of the brothers reached for her, and the terrified girl fled screaming toward the door. A flicker of Cooney's eyelid, and the Bump-off darted after her, followed by the gangster's woman. Cornelius Simpkins, Jr., did not see them leave.

"Sit down, Simpkins," said Cooney, quietly pushing a glass across the ta-

ble. "Have a drink. Get some cigars, will you, Tom?"

As Bump-off started toward the bar, Cooney uttered an inarticulate excuse and followed him. They spoke in quick, low sentences.

"That kid knows too much."

"Sure does."

"Croak 'im."

"But God, Jerry, he's young Simpkins."

"Croak 'im."

"Tonight?"

"No. That last bunch saw him come in."

Jerry thought for a moment, then laughed.

"Get him tomorrow afternoon, at 4 o'clock, across Boulevard A. What does he drive?"

"Green Packard runabout."

The two men went back to the table.

"Kate!" called the boy. "Where's Kate?"

"Kate beat it with another guy," said Jerry. "She said you was a lousy bum."

"Lousy bum herself," growled Cornelius Simpkins, Jr.

"Say, buddy," began the leader, "whadda you run around with that old jane for? Say, I can put you next to the sweetest little apple dumpling you ever saw, regular Venus. You drive out to the corner of Boulevard A and Fiftieth street tomorrow afternoon, and park on the south side, at exactly 4 o'clock——"

"Oh, he's too drunk to talk to. Drive his car home for him, Tom. Call him up tomorrow and offer him a girl and a case of Scotch, and for God's sake, when you see that green Packard, fill it so full of slugs they can't find the chassis."

SHORTLY before 4 o'clock the next afternoon, the president of the Simpkins Motor Specialty Co. parked his big sedan in Second street, and Jerry

Cooney piloted Simpkins and Patton into a soft-drink parlor.

They walked through the back door into a dark room littered with broken boxes and barrels, up a rickety flight of stairs and into a dimly lighted room with a low, slanting wooden roof.

One side of the room was built up with shelves, piled from floor to ceiling with mothproof bags. The darkness of several long furs intensified the gloom of one corner.

Now Sam Williams came forward. He was small, suave, polite—quite in contrast with his surroundings. If one of Mr. Cooney's friends wanted this wonderful fur, it was his for a song; otherwise, it would keep.

"It's a fine-looking coat," agreed the purchaser, half-fumbling for his wallet. "Take a look at it, Patton."

Patton carried the garment to the single window of the room and looked closely at the edge of the fur and its lining. Then, without a word, he handed it back to Mr. Simpkins.

"Well?"

"Mr. Cooney," said Patton, quietly, "I was a fur-buyer for five years."

"Then," said the gangster, in a cool, even tone, "you ought to know a good coat when you see it."

"Simpkins, those little holes are old needle marks. This is a second-hand coat with a new lining. When it was new it would have retailed for about \$300."

The second vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce withdrew his hand from his wallet and looked at Cooney. The gangster stepped backward, tore a board from a shelf, raised it shoulder high and struck Sam Williams a blow with the flat of the board.

"There, you dirty skunk!" he cried, kicking the man's prostrate body. "I'll teach you to double-cross a gentleman."

Cooney tossed the board out of the window and turned to his visitors with a metallic laugh.

"He'll remember that when he wakes up."

The two men were rather silent as they drove to the office of the Simpkins Motor Specialty Co. In fact they exchanged only two sentences.

"Well, anyway, Cooney was square," said Simpkins.

"Was he?" asked Patton.

AS THE car drew up to the Simpkins office, an excited bookkeeper leaped from the doorway and ran to the curb.

"Mr. Simpkins!" he cried. "Telephone to the Fiftieth Street police station, quick. They won't tell me what it is, but they've got to get you quick."

"Maybe they've pinched my bootlegger," wise-cracked Cornelius as he picked up the receiver. "Hello!"

As he listened to the message, his face turned ashen gray.

"No, no!" he cried. "Not my boy! You lie! You lie! Oh, God! My boy!"

The receiver dropped from his ear when the message was completed.

"Patton!" he called.

"What is it? For God's sake . . ."

"My boy—he's arrested for murder. They say—he killed a girl. It's a lie, Patton. Get my lawyer. Some girl—Kate—Kate somebody—was thrown out of an automobile, dead. They say Junior was with her, in a cafe, at 3 o'clock this morning. They arrested him—just now—at 4 o'clock—crossing Boulevard A."

"It'll come out all right. What does the boy say?"

"He said he—couldn't remember. He was—drunk."

THE DOOR opened and Police Captain Horan entered.

"Mr. Simpkins," he said, after a

whispered word with Patton, "we want to give your boy every chance that belongs to him. He was with this girl. We have six witnesses who swear it. But there may be something more to it. Do you know anything about the message he got, telling him to be at Fiftieth and Boulevard A at 4 this afternoon?"

"Not a thing."

"He says he has a dim memory of somebody saying the same thing to him last night in the Turquoise Cafe—"

"What!"

"But the other witnesses claim they didn't see anybody else there."

"I was in that cafe—at midnight."

"Did you see anybody you knew?"

"Jerry Cooney—"

"Great God!"

"What's the matter?"

"Is your son mixed up with the Cooney gang?"

"Of course not. What do you mean?"

"Where's a city map? . . . Here, on the wall! Look here! Here's the Fiftieth Street police station, the last station on the south side. Here's Boulevard A, the last traffic stop on the road. Three miles out is the Cooney roadhouse, the headquarters of the gang. That straight-away is where they do their machine-gun murders."

"I don't understand."

"I mean that if your son hadn't been arrested—if he had crossed that boulevard—the Cooney gang would have murdered him."

"That can't be true, Captain. I know Jerry Cooney. He wouldn't—"

"There's only one flaw in the argument," Captain Horan continued. "Cooney always plays safe. He gets himself locked up for carrying concealed weapons on the day of a gang murder. Today he's loose."

"Captain," said Simpkins, "all I want is to clear my boy of the charge against him. I know he's innocent, and I know Jerry Cooney wasn't planning to kill him. I'll tell you something, Captain. Cooney and I had a little deal to talk over—a real estate deal. I was with him, downtown, at 4 o'clock this afternoon."

"What!"

CAPTAIN HORAN'S mouth hung open. Before he could speak again, Jerry Cooney walked into the office.

"Mr. Simpkins," he said, ignoring the officer, "I just heard that your boy was arrested, and I want to help you out. I was in the café when they came. That girl got mad because the boy was drunk, and she walked out on him. One of my men drove Neal home at half-past three this morning, and we've got four witnesses to prove it."

Cornelius Simpkins seized the gangster's hand.

"Jerry," he said, "I knew you were a square-shooter. If there's anything on earth I can do for you, call on me."

"That's all right, Mr. Simpkins, always glad to do a turn for a friend."

THE morning paper gave nearly two pages to the murder of Miss Katherine Hadley, with a satisfactory space devoted to the complete exoneration of young Mr. Cornelius Simpkins, Jr. It was quite natural that the elder Simpkins should have overlooked a little item on page 17 of the same issue, reading as follows:

Sam Williams, said by the police to be an agent for several pawn-brokers and suspected of being a fence, was found dead in his room above 315 Second Street late last night. His skull had been fractured by a blow from a blunt instrument. There are no clues.

Nor did Mr. Simpkins hear the remarks which passed when Jerry Cooney and Captain Horan met in the street at noon:

"Hello, Captain! Looking for me today?"

"Not today, Jerry. But I want to congratulate you."

"What on?"

"The perfect alibi."



Nothing Ever Happens to Angel!



by
EVADNE PRICE

I.—The Allerton Ruby

The first of a series of short stories, each complete in itself.



THIS Xmas Day, though sitting here in the brilliant sunshine of Villefranche it's hard to credit it.

In fact, to be candid, I'd quite forgot it *was* that auspicious day of gifts and goodwill till Madam Piloti what runs this quiet little hotel on the key-side where I'm recooperating, sent me up an invite in French to the "Grande Souper Dansant" in the Saloon at 23 o'clock, what is the foreign way of saying 11 p. m. Not that I ought to go with the fractured leg not really strong yet.

And then, right on top of that Gaby's Xmas card, Mr. Antony's cheque, and Mr. Abraham's letter which has started me in thinking about the excitement of last Xmas that ended in me getting a judgment on me for complaining that nothing ever happened in my dull life.

My name is Angelica Flower,

known to friends as Angel. It isn't the name on my passport but no matter. It's my nom de theatre, as we say in the language of the country.

I am a chorus lady, temp. retired, touring and respectable and no strain on the eyesight if a bit past my first bloom, although to look at the photo on my passport you'd take me for a middle-aged washerlady bidding a long farewell to some shirts she knew instinctive she'd never see cash for.

EVERYBODY what knows the inns and outs of the stage knows that in 1924 and 5 things was simply chronic in the profession, and me not being as young as I once was, and managers being biassed to flappers of sixteen, I was getting so that Gloom was my maiden name. My Post Office bankbook was acquireing that dogeared nasty look of wear and

tear that jars on the sensitive, and Gaby Du Vane, my stable companion what shared my so-called oneroomed bachelor-girl flat, being another name for a bedroom with a gasring concealed, was also losing that school-girl complexion with worry. Well I remember the Saturday night me and her faced one another, our proud spirits fair broke.

"Angel," sniffs Gaby, "I'm done. Broke. Head bowed in dust, as they say."

To prove which she annexes my last clean hanky.

"Gaby," says I retrieving same absent-minded, "ditto. The bank is bust. Here's my book to prove statement. How about touching your married sister for a few odd coppers to ward off the wolf?"

She laughs a sisterly laugh of amusement at my little joke.

"That dame wouldn't give a blind kitten a saucer of sour milk unless it paid cash for it," she says brief and bitter. "I wouldn't care," she reasons, "if I wasn't a clergyman's daughter."

I shook the peroxide bottle impatient. Empty, of course, and the dark parting about to reveal the secret of my sunny locks to a cold world. I knew if Gaby got the gramophone turned on about her poor pa it was adew to a business talk, so I breaks in quick with:

"Well, the boards is dead meat pro temm for us, Gaby. Our age is agin us till managers begins to appreciate real talent once more."

"You speak for yourself," says she in a rage. "I'm no' old age pensioner yet, believe me."

"I'm not a enterprenner," I retorts severe. "And your age, one way or another, don't thrill me, Gaby. But just recollect I get a close-up of your beauty early every morn."

She favors me with a Vere de Vere stare for a full minute, but I dangle

the empty housekeeping purse before her starry orbs and she forgot her age.

"To resoom," says I, "things is desperate. So today, instead of wasting golden hours looking for theatre jobs what are not, I been elsewhere, and I got an offer of real steady Work. Yes, you can turn pale. No one knows better than me what a nasty sound that words got. It's not what we been accustomed to, but we'll be treat as ladies. For, Gaby, if your pa was a clergyman, mine was a retired Major, and if I can sink my family pride and be a waitress——"

Gaby clutches her heart and screams. "A wotress?" she demands.

"A waitress," says I firm. "You and me, Gaby. We wear a chints dress and are called Miss. It's a high-class cafe on the Bath Road for motorists. Refinement and elegance is the password, so the Duchess in charge of the employment bureau tells me."

"My family," wails Gaby.

"Your family won't come across with the coppers for the Sunday joint," says I, firm as a couple of rocks.

"My poor dead pa," she weeps.

"Your poor dead pa is where they have their meat well-cooked on Sundays," I retorts cruel.

And in the end I got my way, which is how we come to be on Euston Station two days later waiting for the train to Dibwich, though Gaby's married sister says we knew Mr. Hank Antony was in the vicinity all the time, which was a lie if ever there was one.

IT WAS me, Angel, what first noticed the man in the plus fours, me having a weakness for a goodlooker.

"Lamp the sheik in the plus fours, Gaby," I says.

"I should worry if he's in plus fives," she snaps nasty.

"Well," I says, "anything to relieve the monotony of my dull life." So I looks again.

Gee, he was the swellest looker I had cast my merry lamps on for many a full moon. Tall, he was, six foot one if an inch, and his teeth was like a front page dentifrice advert.

I couldn't see his eyes. He was looking down loving at his lady friend, a pretty little dark thing just young enough to wear them velvet hats with a chin strap and look good in it. I'd had a terrible battle with Gaby to stop her from wearing likewise, which was why she was shedding the sunshine of her smile round Euston Station at the time of going to press.

"Gaby," I was obliged to say, kind but firm, "take them strings from under your chin, or rather chins. You look like an old clo' lady gone wrong. Recollect our new employer has yet to get over the shock of our debut."

Consequent, Gaby withdrew to the far end of the carriage to sulk when the train come in, and I continued my survey of Apollo. The dark girl, leaning out of the carriage next door to our humble Third was dead nuts on Apollo, I could see.

"I shall count the hours till you write," she remarked.

Apollo smiled and so did I. I've pulled the same old gag myself so often it always makes me smile the way the trusting male laps it up and comes back for a second help.

I started to whistle careless and loud, eyes averted and ears flapping for more of the love duet.

"I'll write soon, darling," crooned Apollo.

I was just admiring his technique and comparing him favorable with Godfrey Tearle when she leaned nearer to him and whispered "For God's sake, Joe, be careful. I got nerves this time, and I don't trust that quitter Pilbrook."

"Shut up, you blasted little fool," Apollo pertified me by fair hissing.

Well, I tell you—you could of knocked me down by breathing on me. I waited for the lady to tear him limb from limb in a few well-chosen words. Personally, I'd of landed him a gentle, ladylike palm across the ear, but she only turns white and says pleading "Forgive me, Joe."

Well, I felt sorry for her being that far gone. The train begun to move and a porter bunted Apollo in the plus fours with an empty truck, and as he skipped aside nimble I seen his eyes for the first time, although he never noticed me at all.

And believe me or not, as you like, one of them was brown and the other blue.

NATURALLY, at first, I couldn't put Apollo and his ladylove out of my mind.

But on arrival at Dibwich, Gaby suddenly forgets the chin strap and her sulks and rushes at a short, stocky man in black and white cheque and screams "Hank!" and he retorts "Gaby, little cutie," betraying he was an American, us not using that enderment in England, so I forget everything else temporary.

For Mr. Hank Antony was an old admirer of Gaby's what she'd turned down in the old days when she was leading on the beauty chorus in an English show what was doing a season on Broadway, New York, because she was after a career and he hadn't made his fortune, anyway. Now he had.

He was a millionaire he told us, and had just bought Vanders Hall near Dibwich, the big estate what was going to wrack and ruin until Mr. Antony started in to renovate it.

"And," says Mr. Antony, "I'm residing there to see them British work-

men, alleged, do a spot of honest toil. I've only a few bedrooms, and I live in the baroneal hall because the drawing-rooms and the dining-halls and the libraries and cetra are not fit for pigs to domicile in. Call and see me, girls. What's your address?"

Gaby looked ashamed, but not me. I ups and says defiant:

"Me and Gaby, Mr. Antony, is down on our luck, the stage at the moment being a whitened sepulker, so to state, and we're temp. being waitress at the Bijou Cafe on the main road."

"And," breaks in Gaby, "if you're too grand to know us, Hank——"

"Cut out the weeping heroine dope, kiddo," was what Mr. Antony says to that.

So he give us a lift in his Rolls for which he's coughed up a trifling sum of two thousand quids, showing us the bill, which he had handy to prove he was no liar. Oh, he was a perfect gent, was Mr. Antony, and I didn't half envy my pal for restriking his trail.

You should of seen the face of Mrs. Teashop (her real name was Trehearn, but I never could remember it. She was one of *the* Trehearns, but it cut no ice with me, as I never heard the name before) when we sailed up in our Rolls, complete with chauffeur.

One look at us and I could see our name was MUD, but Mr. Antony ordered a magnificent tea with eggs for three, so she calmed her suspicions and charged him for them later in the bill.

Then, just as we was beginning to get matey she approaches our table cold and suggests a spot of work, so Gaby and me reluctant tore ourselves away.

Things always come in threes, and when I entered the bedroom we was to occupy Shock Number Three was waiting. Lying on the bed, dressed in chints, was the dark young lady

Apollo had been goodbyeing at Euston!

WELL, I ask you as a friend, could you beat that? I tried to discuss it with Gaby, but she was too busy being young and kittenish about Mr. Antony to care about my troubles.

And then Mrs. Teashop come and hounded us out and starts us in cleaning silver and laying tables for dinner, and I got no chance to ask the dark girl anything about Apollo, though I was aching to hear her life story. Her name was Minnie Castle, I dug out of her while we was in the pantry, and I was about to give my detective instinct a little more play when Mrs. Teashop bustled in and put the tin hat on idle converse for the moment.

She did all the cooking herself, did Mrs. Teashop. She loved hard work, she told me, and I could see she was laboring under the deloosion that I shared her grand passion.

So you can believe me or not that when I tottered into my downy couch at 11 p. m. there was not much strength left for girlish gossip. And next morn, when we was roused rude at early dawn by an alarm clock, 7 to be exacting, none of us felt much in the humor for caroling Mendel-son's Spring Song.

Gaby looked a picture in the cold light of day, I don't think, and I only made a hasty toilet myself.

I was just going to chip Minnie about Apollo and ask her if Tosti raised his bowler hat when he said goodbye at Euston, when the sweet voice of Mrs. Teashop floated brisk up the stairs, so we got a move on. She'd of made a splendid wife for Napoleon, would Mrs. Teashop. She never needed no sleep either.

Well, I toiled like a galley slave all day without a break till four-thirty, and by then I felt like chanting The Red Flag and going completely Bol-

shie. It was Minnie's afternoon off, and Gaby and me had her work to do as well as ours, and my head was splitting.

Final, and with firmness, I warns Mrs. Simon Legree Teashop that if I don't get a breath of air before dinner I'll be a corpse on her hands, so the nigger driver lets me out reluctant for ten minutes and no more.

I walked along the main road, but after I had escaped a narrow death four times in as many minutes from gentlemen drivers what was too busy pretending they were competing for the Gold Cup at Brooklands to bother about my precious life, I struck off down a side turn. It was cold being November, but lovely weather and I come over all reckless about returning in the stated ten minutes.

Knowing Mrs. Teashop, I figured that after paying my exes down she'd hang onto my body like a limpet till she got her money back, so I walks on till I come to a lamp shining on some big stone gates near a lodge.

The lodge was not inhabited by the look of same, and judging by the ladders and scaffolding I concluded it was probably a bit of Mr. Antony's estate.

It looked about as cheery as a wet cat in a foreign land, and I was just turning back when the gates opened sudden and out come, of all people—Minnie, plus a stout, ginger gent of about fifty, very dignified looking.

"Let me know as soon as you can," she was saying.

Then she seen me and registered annoyance, so I turned to go, but she did a quick farewell and caught me up. "Mind if I walk back with you?" she says.

"Righty oh," I says affable. "Gee, but you're the swift one, Minnie. I take my lid off to you. When it comes to getting off, you village maids have us trained vampires knocked silly. How did you do it?"

"I asks him where was a nice, quiet walk," she explains, "and he offers to show the grounds of that place, Vanders Hall. He's the butler there."

Minnie's stock fell below par at once. A common butler. There's nothing snobbish about me, heaven knows, but I do bar menials.

An actor in a show once was terribly gone on me, but I just couldn't work up any passion for him, his line of business being valets. It's pa's refinement coming out in me, I guess.

"Oh," I drawls superior, "I'm a personall friend of the American gent what's purchased Vanders Hall. An old family acquaintance. My pa was a retired major in the Army" (I slung that in to let her know I was a lady born in case she hadn't noticed it).

"Fancy," she sneers, "Salvation Army, I suppose?"

Well, to have the bird to my face like that! I couldn't think of a soot-able retort to cap that, so we walks home in strained silence, me too annoyed to mention Apollo as I'd intended fully, and after Mrs. Teashop had spilled a few hometruths re me and my personal accomplishments I retired through a gap in hedge to bed very sad and depressed.

AND SO things went on for a week more. I was, though hardworked, lonely, for the motorists what patronized the Bijou was ever eating agin time and had no inclination to brighten my young life by any back-chat.

An absentminded lot they was, so absentminded they generally forgot to tip me, and faded into the night leaving a trail of petrol-scented air behind and a sad-faced lady gazing after them thinking things she'd be arrested for if she said them aloud.

Yes, lonely I was, and Gaby—well, Gaby was straining my lifelong de-

voshion to breaking point in these days.

To begin with it was Hank—Hank—Hank till I could of drowned myself. And she was growing so young it was pathetic.

She told Minnie one day she hardly recollected the Great War being at Finishing School during that sad period, and I felt almost glad when Minnie inquired sarcastic if she meant Borstal Finishing School. Well, it shut Gaby up, and she refused, naturall, to speak to her again, and I had to stand by my pal and act according.

Mr. Antony nearly lived in the Bijou and Mrs. Teashop was so affable to Gaby about his custom that she give me nearly all that dame's work to do while she entertained him.

Fortunate, I was used to Fate's blows. Blessed is she what expecteth nix, because she usually gets it. Nothing ever happened in my dull life, I was wont to complain bitter.

"I'VE got an invite for us for Xmas Day," announces Gaby the week before Xmas.

"As soon as I told Mr. Antony we was free for that day he ups and says you two dolls must come to me. He's got three gentlemen friends coming from town, and we'll have a merry time."

Well, needless to say that cheered me no end, and I dug my jade Georgett out of my theatre basket, the one I'd pinched from the wardrobe of the "Mr. Fish of Grimsby" Revue in loo of salary the manager having skipped it without paying, with a view to turning same into a Paris model.

"What's that old rag you're fondling?" asks Minnie with her usual old-world curtessey.

"That," says I dignified, "is to be the dress I'm wearing to Mr. Antony's Xmas dinner at Vanders Hall."

And I must say that floored her. She started and turned pale, rage I supposed, and I felt I'd scored for once.

It was with positive pleasure I went on duty at 3 thirty and there was hardly a break till 6 it being a fine day for the time of the year and Gaby being off as usual with her swain. I'd just cleared and was about to set for dinner when in come a tall man and sat himself at one of my tables.

"Blow," says I, having been reprov'd in public recent by Mrs. Teashop for stronger expletives, when Minnie, looking threw the curtains of the pantry says quick "I'll do his order for you."

Well, I was surprised and it flashed threw my mind that she was trying to be nice to wheadle an invite to Mr. Antony's party, so I retorts cold and haughty "Thanks I can take care of my orders myself, not being actually old and decreppit yet," which I did.

He was affable and I served him quick and agile, wishing he'd remove his motor goggles, as his figure was good. I didn't go nutty over his yellow pointed beard, but as he spoke in a foreign accent I passed the beard, foreigners not being responsible for the way they mutillate their beauty.

"You go up and rest," offers Minnie, "I'll give him his bill."

Still hankering after that invite, thinks I, oh no, nor the tip, my lady, so I scorns this second offer and determines she shant get near that table except over my dead corpse. But at that minute Mrs. Teashop yodels and believe me or not as you like, I'd only been gone no longer than you could count ten, and I return just in time to catch Minnie slipping the foreigner a note—not our billform, they was artistic and orange to go with cafe, but a *note*.

He'd removed his motor goggles,

why I don't know, unless the strap was broke, and I heard him say hurried to her "Quick, start clearing before that dyed-headed fool returns," (meaning me I gathered) *and he hadn't a trace of foreign accent!*

Then Minnie pretending to clear up, knocks his goggles on the floor accident, and your truly, stepping forward, hands them back to him haughty.

Then I come all over queer as he said Mercy and smiled at me. *One eye was blue and the other brown.* It was Apollo disguised in a pointed yellow beard.

WELL, I didn't know what to think, and the dialogue at Euston come back to me "For God's sake, Joe, be careful. I don't trust Pillbrook" or words to that effect, and cetera.

Something was going on, though what you could search me. And who was Pillbrook? And what was Minnie doing here giving note to Apollo disguised?

I never pretended to be extra bright from the neck up, but instinct told me I'd better lie low, so I stifled my womanly feelings re Apollos uncalled for remarks re dyed headed fools and accepted his opulent tip of 6d with becoming maidenly modesty, and after he'd done a fadeout I told Minnie I'd be thankful if in future she'd not get fresh with my customers, thanks.

Then I noticed a little crushed up scrap of paper on the floor and it dawned on me that for all his swank Apollo wasn't as slick as he thought he was. Minnie was still prowling so I waited till she'd gone, my dainty number 3 on the incriminating evidence, as we say at Scotland Yard, and finally The Clutching Hand retrieved it. It read—"Xmas Day. 10 p. m. sharp. Bedroom overlooking lake. Red lampshade."

Well, I'm fairly broadminded and

it takes a lot to shock me, but I must say I thought this a trifle on the compromising side for a rundayvoo. I wondered then if Apollo was a married man and she was conducting what the French term a leasong, but this seemed a bit weak for the Willie Clarkson beard.

And Pillbrook too, it didn't account for him. Where did he come in and why didn't Minnie trust him. Not that I blamed her for not trusting any man.

I gave it up final and shut my lovely eyes. I needed all the beauty sleep I could get and more than that. The Go-To-The-Ant-Thou-Sluggard Business is all right in a piece of poetry, but the poet never worked for Mrs. Teashop or he would of calmed his enthusiasm.

EVENTSHALLY the great day of Xmas dawned, and finally Gaby and me, she in girlish pale blue looking sweet though a trifle overblown, and yours merrily a picture of refinement in the jade Georgett renovated, was standing in Mr. Antony's baroneal hall being introjuced to three gentleman friends of his, everyone of which was blazing with diamond shirt studs and at least two rings to match. It was wealth personyfyde and I felt my spirits leap like a startled fawn.

Mr. Antony needn't of apologised for the diningroom not being ready, the baroneal hall was big enough to feed a regiment. There was a big stairway coming down the middle, all polished oak. For me, I'd of preferred a nice cheery red carpet and Mr. Antony agreed and so did the gentleman friends, but he said sad that polished oak was tone though chilly.

Up on the first landing was his bedroom and extra ones for the gentleman friends, otherwise the mansions was still wrack and ruin, with only a cook, a butler and one maid. And Mr. Antony said that all his life

he'd dreamed of being an English aristocrat and here was his dreams come true.

So we sat down to dinner at 8 thirty and it will tell you what a spread it was when by 9 thirty we hadn't reached the turkey. I did feel happy, especial as Minnie's conkwest was waiting on me hand and foot, though I must say he was buttlng better than any stage ditto I ever seen.

Mr. Antony didn't have to tell him a thing he was so good. You never adressed a butler in real life like stage folks did, he told us, the book of Etikette was very firm on that point, this being a nasty slap in the eyeball for one of the gentleman friends what had been calling the butler Bill.

There was a painful interlood at this showing up of commoness and to change the subject Mr. Abrahams, the gentleman friend next to me, he says "I hope you've locked the Allerton Ruby safe away, Hank old-feller-melad."

"Yes," says Mr. Antony careless, "it's locked in a combination safe in my bedroom I defy anyone to open bar me."

"Oh!" I says all coy and blushing, "what's the Allerton Ruby, Mr. Antony?" the very mention of jewelery being like the breath of life to me, it being, as I have ever maintained, better than money in the bank if you can once get your claws into the same.

Mr. Anthony coughs important.

"The Allerton Ruby," he says pompous, "is the gem of my collection of jewels. A millionaire like me must have a hobby if he wants to get into the best society and mine is historic jewels. Mr. Abrahams brought the Allerton Ruby to-day, having just concluded the deal we've been trying to put through for seven weeks. It cost a hundred thousand pounds and dirt cheap it was. The gift of a king to his lady friend."

Well, I went all faint at the men-

tion of so much cash and the thought of a king chucking it away careless like that, and wanting a drink to revive me found my glass empty. The butler had his back to us being busy dissecting the turkey's corpse at the sideboard, so Mr. Antony forgetting the book of Etikette has to address him personal.

"Pilbrook," he calls out, "fizz for the little lady."

PILBROOK! You can imagine my feelings. All at once I found my brain fair jazzing with suspicions, Apollo, Minnie's remark re Pilbrook, Minnie *with* Pilbrook.

Then the great white light dawned sudden—the Allerton Ruby, value a hundred thousand Fishers and dirt cheap at that. I tell you I fair mopped down that glass of bubbly. Which I needed, for at that identical moment I reckolected the note—"Ten o'clock, Xmas Night. Bedroom overlooking lake. Red Lampshade."

I'd got it at last. Apollo was going to make a break for the Allerton Ruby tonight while we was gorging ourselves at dinner. Pilbrook had fixed the time. It was now a quarter to ten and only little me knew the plot.

At that moment Pilbrook bent to pick up the serviette I'd dropped and I saw a bump in his pocket—a revolver! So I couldn't warn Mr. Antony or Pilbrook might shoot. The thought of all that lovely money going west nearly drove me potty.

Something had to be done in the next few minutes. Ah! I had it. Get Mr. Antony to fetch the jewel down into the hall where I could keep my eye on it, and while Mr. Antony was upstairs get Pilbrook into the kitchen on some pretext and tell the gentleman friends quick and smash Pilbrook over the head with a bottle as he was coming in again.

I felt I'd be like Henry the something King of England and never

smile again if Apollo got away with the doings.

10 to 10.

"Mr. Antony," I purrs desperate, feeling I was going to pass out in a faint, "would you be an angel——"

"One angel's enough at a Christmas party, Angel," says Mr. Antony shiv-alrous, "which is you Angel."

At any other time I would of appreciated this gallant stuff but now I only thinks to myself: Can it, you silly fool.

"Let us little girls have a peek at the Allerton Ruby now," I says coy.

Pilbrook starts violent at this and nearly drops my portion of turkey on the jade Georgett. I could see he was all nerves and on the key vive for sounds from above. So was I.

"After dinner, Angel," interrupts Gaby, annoyed at me for toying with her property, but I insists gay and girlish, backed up by Mr. Abrahams and so Mr. Antony rises reluctant. 5 to 10. I was dying, I knew, but I was past trifles like that.

I seen Pilbrook feel for the revolver as Mr. Antony ran upstairs, but Mr. Abrahams at the crucible moment made the fake butler show him the professional way to unlock a bottle of fizz, and Pilbrook dare-sent say no, his game being, I took it, to play innocent little Goldilocks when the theft was discovered.

Well, I watched the big hands of the hall clock and I tell you they fair seemed to jazz round them last two minutes, and Mr. Antony didn't return and Pilbrook was still opening fizz, and as it begun to chime 10 I could stand it no longer.

"I'm going up to help Mr. Antony," I screams girlish, and evading Mr. Abrahams and ignorring Gaby's nasty look of rage, I fled up the stairs giggling and acting to deceive Pilbrook as I never done when I was paid for it.

He didn't follow as I half thought he might, and I flew along the top corridor not knowing which was the bedroom overlooking lake until I turned a corner and seen a door with a red light showing threw. I made a beeline for this, panic-struck with fright but determined that Apollo should not do it across Mr. Antony after calling me a dyed-headed fool, so I crashed the door open and cried "Oh, Mr. Antony."

THEN I reolised I was too late. The safe was wide open (I found after the hall clock was 10 minutes slow) and Apollo was just playfully crashing poor Mr. Antony over the head with a bit of iron piping when I made my star entrance.

Apollo looked surprised to see me blowing in like a morning zeffer, and he said something I can't repeat on paper, but I never stopped my hed-long rush, and before he could get what I was at I had snatched the little black metal box he was clutching and turned round and raced through the door I'd come in as quick as a knife yelling "Help Help," Apollo after me with the iron piping and me terrified every second was to see my exit from this vail of tears and the awful picture of poor Mr. Antony bleeding to death on his own bedroom floor.

The stairway seemed miles away and I cursed that slippery polished oak until Apollo fell on it when I reolised our ancestors knew something, but he scrambled up again quick and all the time I kept squeeling "Help Help." And then I gained the head of the stairs and at that moment Apollo caught me and tried to wrench the Allerton Ruby from me, but though I felt sure he'd do me, my blood was up and with a last yell I threw it down the stairs.

Mr. Abrahams was rushing up and the others was at the bottom, I just

caught a blurry glimpse of their faces as I struggled mad with Apollo, and then I heard Mr. Abrahams call "Look out, Angel!" and Apollo let me go sudden, give me a push, my foot slipped on the slippery oak and I went flying head first down the stairs. There was a crash, a few million comets, and I remember nix after that.

IT WAS day when I came to feeling like death warmed up and Gaby was sitting besides me with a swollen nose looking a dream of delight and a nurse was flitting about.

"Mr. Antony," I whispered surprised I couldn't talk proper. "Is he dead?"

"No," says Florence Nightingale, "go to sleep" which I did, obedient though I wanted to know lots.

Not for days after did I hear the horrible details, that Pilbrook vanished at my first scream, leaving Apollo to his fate—Minnie knew something not to trust Pilbrook, the dirty quitter—that Apollo and Minnie had made a clean get-away, that Mr. Antony was only stunned, that

I, poor mutt, had concussion and a double knee-fracture, but best of all, to my mind, that I had saved the Allerton Ruby for Mr. Antony.

SO HERE I am in Villefranche at Mr. Antony's and Gaby's expence. Yes, Gaby hooked him good and hard while she was at Vanders Hall nursing my fracture and getting in Florence Nightingale's way and shedding tears over me.

And it's Xmas Day again, though sitting here in the brilliant sun of Villefranche it's hard to credit same.

And Mr. Abrahams, what I've always had a soft spot for since he made Pilbrook open that bottle of fizz at the right moment, hopes to bring me a New Year Gift when he comes to Nice for the New Year with Gaby and Mr. Antony. And Nice being only a few miles from Villefranche I shall be there with bells on.

Yes, things are looking up for Angel, fractured knee or no.

But all the same, you won't catch little Angel complaining again in a hurry that nothing ever happens to her!



The Bird of Wisdom



*The Legend of the
Cover Design*



T TOOK the weird workings of the old Persian mind to create such a fantastic bird.

Not only the Bird, but its nest of pure ebony and the inaccessible cliffs of rare gems and precious stones on the top of which the nest rested, were enveloped in a cloud of mystery.

Its whole existence was a mystery out of which Persia received a mythical gift.

A voice from somewhere spoke to the Bird of Wisdom, sending it to the top of a certain mountain. There it found a boy who had been left to die.

This boy had a wonderful body but *hair* that was pure *white*. He was the son of the old ruler of Persia, who loved him but who could not stand the jibes of his people about the child's hair. To save his pride he had rid himself of the boy.

Evidently the Bird had a soft spot in its heart, for it took the boy to its nest and not only cared for him, but taught him mores wisdom than any had ever before possessed.

At night, with the boy on its back, the Bird would fly to the moon and the stars, where the boy learned the secrets of the heavens. At other times it would fly with the boy to the haunts of men and teach the boy all the knowledge of man.

Before long the old ruler's conscience began to trouble him so much that he was unable to eat or sleep. At last he couldn't stand it any longer.

He found his way to the boy and begged his forgiveness.

The boy was pretty lonesome and glad to return home with his dad. In time he married and the Bird of Wisdom brought to the couple a baby, the most wonderful baby in all Persia.

This baby was the mythical gift, the great national hero, Rustem.

FRED. T. EVERETT.

Dead Men Make No Music

By EDWINA LEVIN MACDONALD

A FIVE PART STORY—PART TWO



WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED:

Odollee Meynard, protected by convent walls for fifteen years, receives a summons on her eighteenth birthday to come with a girl friend to the home of the Meynards on one of the islands of the Mississippi Delta and meet her father whom she has not seen since she was three years old.

While waiting in New Orleans for the boat which is to carry her to her destination, she sees a stranger whose handsome bearing intrigues her fancy.

She finds herself being followed by strange men—and when she accosts them they tell her that they have been set to guard her by her father.

On the train, on the way to the boat, she again meets the handsome stranger, who is now accompanied by two ugly old men. The trio are taking the same boat. On board there is also a strange woman whose actions quite upset Jackie Tarver, Odollee's companion.

On the island the two girls find a prevailing atmosphere of tenseness. But they are assured by Sanchez, an old serving woman, that everything is all right, and are shown to their rooms. On inspection they discover that the windows of the room are barred and that there is only one outside exit to the suite. Frightened, they rush out of the house and find themselves, unexpectedly, in a beautiful garden on the north side of the house.

Odollee inquires of the gardener, Joe Tobias, as to the whereabouts of Pierre Meynard, her father. Joe is shocked, but not half as much so as are Odollee and Jackie when, perplexed, he ejaculates "Why, Miss—he's been dead for thirty years!"

CHAPTER X

"YOU ARE AN IMPOSTOR!"



HERE must be a sort of stop-clock located somewhere in the mind which shuts off the power to function when reason has reached the end of its endurance.

When Joe Tobias uttered those

words so appalling to two girls in our situation, "There *was* such a man as Pierre Meynard, but, God rest his soul, he's been dead thirty years," I was all at once curiously indifferent to the whole matter.

My knees felt weak and I sat down rather suddenly on one of the stone steps. I recollect gazing about in mild wonder at the groomed luxu-

riance of the grounds, so unlike that desolation which marked the south front of the house and its western side.

It occurred to me that Odollee looked like one of the marble pieces belonging to the grounds—temporarily out of place in the walk. Her creamy sport dress was the exact color of her face. Her hair looked like gold inlay. Her hands hung limp.

I was dimly surprised that I could not even detect the rise and fall of her bosom. She had apparently stopped breathing, her eyes fixed in a dead stare on Joe Tobias.

"Why, Miss——" He took a step toward her, his hand outstretched.

Then, without moving, she said quite distinctly and calmly: "You lie. If Pierre Meynard is dead, he has died in the past six weeks. And I shall make it the business of my life to find out how he died, where he is buried, and why you have told me this lie."

It was now the man's turn to look stunned. His florid face went white, his eyes stared, and after a moment he made the sign of the cross.

"The Holy Mother and all the Saints forbid, Miss," he said solemnly, "which if you seen him, which you muster to speak so positive, faith an' you be seein' a ghost for true. An' it's evil days will be on this house; it havin' had more'n enough evil days a'ready."

"Pierre Meynard is my own father and I mean to know——"

"Your father!" the man squawked. "Your father an' him been dead and buried before you was born! What with me bein' no bigger'n a tadpole me own self when he was buried; but I ricollect it like yisterdy."

He backed away from her, crossing himself, as if firmly convinced that she was insane.

"WHAT'S the matter? What's the matter?" an irascible voice demanded directly over my head. Looking up I saw in one of the second-story windows a pair of broad, masculine shoulders topped by a grizzled and tousled head and a large, furious face.

"Who's this?" the man continued, his angry glance seeming to fairly strike at me, then at Odollee.

"That un," replied Joe, pointing to Odollee, "says she's Mr. Pierre's daughter."

"What! What! What!"

The words were spoken like shots, one after another. It seemed to me that I had never heard words spoken with such explosive rapidity, nor seen so irritable a face.

"What's that? What's that? What's that?"

It appeared that he could not put a question and leave it; but, having uttered it too quickly, must drive it in by repetition.

"I am Odollee Meynard," she said, her face uplifted, arrogant. "I am the daughter of Pierre Meynard, and I am here by my father's request." Her voice was coldly insolent, as if to put a rude person in place.

It would be impossible to reproduce on paper the sound that man emitted. It was a half scream on a succession of short "a's" strung together. And in it there was derision and something like fear.

"You lie! Lie! Lie!" he shouted. "Pierre never had a daughter. Impostor! Impostor! Impostor! Do you hear me? You're an impostor!"

"Yes, I hear you."

"Then admit it. Admit it. And I'll say no more about it. I'll send you back where you came from. How did you get here? But no matter. Admit you're an impostor. I won't hurt you. I give you my word of honor. The honor of a Meynard. Joe Tobias shall witness I promised on my honor not to bother you. Well.

Well. Go on. Go on. Admit it. Admit it."

Never have I heard such a volley of words. And this time there was no doubt about it—they held fear. Hideous, nauseating fear—nauseating in a man who had a huge frame and was past middle life. Not only that, but he was pleading with her to acknowledge herself an impostor.

"Why don't you speak? Why don't you speak? You spoke once. Once too much."

It would have been impossible for Odollee to speak, had she been ever so desirous. He scarcely breathed between sentences. Instead, she took from her purse the little black box, opened it, and held up that curious ring.

The voice stopped sharply. The man leaned far over the heavy sill, peering down, clawing at a pair of glasses pinned to his coat lapel.

"Do you know this ring?" Odollee asked in the silence it had produced. "My father told me that if anybody ever branded me an impostor or challenged my right to his name, I was to show that person this ring."

The man had now succeeded in pulling his glasses out on a chain. He adjusted them. Then, letting out the most terrifying scream I ever heard, he withdrew from the window.

THERE was a commotion in the house as of running feet. Quickly the yard was filled with servants coming from around the south side of the house, and the young man of the *Vale* stood in the door through which we had come upon the garden.

"What's the trouble?" he asked. "I thought I heard my father's voice out here." He spoke to Joe, seeming to overlook us in his concern.

"Shure an' you did that. I think he seen the ghost again. He was in

the windy an' he screeched out lack that an' run back."

The dark young face cleared. He laughed shortly. "I thought he was hurt." Then turning to us, as though he had never seen us before, he said: "My name is Meynard. You ladies are probably guests of one of the cottagers on Le Petit Isle, since I haven't seen you about the Inn."

He came down the steps, smiling, cordial and very debonair. I have never seen a handsomer man. He was even better looking than I had thought; and also there was a hint of cruelty in his black eyes and a charming smile which I had not noticed either in the train or on the boat.

His effrontery made me want to sit down again; but in the excitement with the old man I had moved away from the steps and it would have looked crazy to sit down on the lawn.

The sky was paling now. A veil had slipped over the golden radiance and hesitant twilight enveloped us.

"You know we are not guests of some other island," Odollee was saying, her eyes blazing at him. "Why do you pretend you never saw us before when you, yourself, put us on the *Vale* and have traveled all day with us? What is this web of lies you and your servant here are trying to spin around me—perhaps to unhinge my reason?"

The young man stopped short in the walk as she began speaking. Now, his smile returning, he said: "You are mistaking me for my brother John. He was in New Orleans and has just returned on the *Vale*. I have not seen him, however, as he and his friends sent their bags to the house and went over to Le Petit on the little ferry we maintain across the channel. The mistake you have made is a common one. We are twins," he added, pleasantly extending his hand.

HIS voice was well modulated and he spoke with precision, both in the choice of his words and of accent which might have been irritating, but was, instead, charming.

Odollee took no notice of his hand. "It's impossible for even twins to be so alike," she said in a lifeless voice.

His hand still extended: "When you see us together you will see that the dissimilarity is equal to our likeness."

"I am Odollee Meynard," she said, still in lifeless tones.

"Meynard." His hand dropped; but his cordiality increased. "Then we are probably related. You are from France, I take it, since the Louisiana branch of our family has dwindled to my father, my brother and myself."

"I am the daughter of Pierre Meynard." I thought she seemed weary of the repetition.

His smile froze. "You—you were speaking with — my father just now?" His eyes went to the window in which the older man had recently stood. "You told my father that?"

"Yes."

The young man gave her a long look of appraisal. Then, as if satisfied by her evident sincerity, he said with something like pity, "I'm afraid, Miss Meynard, some one has imposed on you."

"There's no doubt of that," she replied haughtily.

After a pause he added: "Come in, please. I'll phone my brother." He glanced at me inquiringly.

"I am Miss Tarver," I said. "And fully in Miss Meynard's confidence."

He gave me a limp hand, but did not smile. "Come in, ladies, if you please." He led us back into the dining-room.

A NEGRO girl was lighting lanterns on brackets against the walls. Another was lighting candles in a large

crystal candelabra above the table.

The man turned toward the main hall. As we entered it the front door opened. And it was as if he had been reflected in a huge mirror directly opposite.

"Hello, Louis! Good evening, ladies," called the reflection. "This is great. I had no idea you were to be our guests. I thought you were probably coming out to one of the cottagers on Le Petit and that Mickey had taken you to the ferry."

He was advancing toward us, followed by Scarecrow and Evil Eyes.

"Miss Tarver, this is my brother John Meynard," said Louis, introducing me first. Then: "And Miss Meynard, John. How do you do, Judge?" He went forward to meet the other men, leaving John to stare blankly at Odollee.

"Meynard?"

"Yes," I broke in. I couldn't bear that Odollee should have to go through that explanation again. "Of course, she's related to you. But don't ask questions now. You'll find out soon enough."

Odollee had mechanically accepted his hand.

"How delightful," he cried. And I saw now that he was quite different from his brother. The same dark aquiline features, but his lips were warmer, his dark eyes softer; not quite so handsome as Louis, but wanting in that suggestion of cruelty which was as marked as it was indefinable in the other.

He was slightly broader, his voice more drawling, his words less carefully chosen. And also his manner was less debonair. Oh, they were indeed very different, and at the same time startlingly alike.

Louis was speaking to the other man in low tones. Now he brought them for introductions. Evil Eyes he designated as Doctor Blackman, and Scarecrow as Judge MacCauley.

I saw by the way they regarded

Odollee that Louis had told them about her. John alone was entirely at ease and clearly delighted with his new relation, indifferent about explanations, content simply to have her here in his house.

He looked at his watch. "Have you ladies been shown to your rooms? We dine at seven. Would you like to dress? We dress here, or not, as we please. You have, however, almost an hour."

"We don't care to dress," said Odollee. "I want to know——"

Louis cut her short. "Come in the library, please. You too, gentlemen." He spoke to the older men. "You are here to get at the bottom of the mystery surrounding this house which is depriving our father of his reason. It might help you if you were to hear what Miss—Meynard has to tell us." He hesitated before pronouncing her name.

John looked blank, his delight erased by his brother's words. As we started to follow Louis the old Malay appeared on the mezzanine.

"You paw, he got one he spell. All right now. He want fo' coom down. But me, I mak' heem fo' lie down. Ver' bad spell."

"Thank you Sanchez," said John. And turning to Odollee, "Our father is far from well."

SANCHEZ came swiftly down the steps. She walked with us for a moment across the hall and beside Odollee.

Louis was ahead with Doctor Blackman and Judge MacCauley. I walked between John and Odollee, and half a step behind them. And in that moment when the old woman walked beside us I saw her reach down, take Odollee's hand, put something into it, and close the fingers.

Odollee's poise, which had been so sadly shaken today, now stood by her. She did not glance around, nor lift her hand when the woman hur-

ried on. Her face did not change.

I was as much surprised by her want of surprise as by the old woman's action. What did this bit of side-play mean?

Had Odollee lied to me? Did she know more than she had told me?

There was something ugly here—truly a scorpion under the bark.

Joe Tobias said he had, as a boy, attended Pierre Meynard's funeral. Before Odollee was born. He recollected it well. . . .

And Joe Tobias was not a liar. On his obvious Irish face shock, even terror, had been clearly written.

Then, if Joe had witnessed Pierre Meynard's burial, who was this Unknown Father of Odollee's who claimed to be Pierre Meynard? And how much did Odollee herself know? That she was not quite above-board was now certain.

And yet I felt sure she had expected to find something different here. She had been frightened by those steel-barred windows in our rooms; hideously upset by the words of the gardener.

LOUIS led the way into a room whose four walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling. Every inch of space was covered except above the windows and doors.

The furniture was oak, upholstered in red leather, and a low fire cast a rosy glow over all. I liked this room. It was as cheerful as it was unexpected.

He pushed a comfortable chair toward Odollee, then drew one up for me, and motioned the men to seats. After which he walked to the mantel, resting an elbow thereon.

"We keep morning and evening fires going in this room," he said as easily as though we were come together merely to spend a pleasant half hour. "The place is built on the ground and so heavily shaded that it is damp and nearly always chilly.

However, it is very little colder in mid-winter than it is now. We keep the windows open the year round."

The older men made casual remarks about the heat in New Orleans. Spoke of the trip out.

Having the actor's highly keyed nerves which enable him to *feel* the attitude of an audience across the footlights before he has spoken three lines, his own performance being often made or ruined by that feeling, I felt all at once an audience . . . a terrifying audience, because it was unseen.

I was distinctly conscious of a hidden presence in the room—the entrance of a powerful personality—one of those ghostly presences one feels sometimes in deserted houses.

I glanced around, half expecting to see some one standing in the door behind me which led to a room we had not seen. But the heavy velvet portieres were together and motionless.

Odollee gave me a swift look. And now I was suddenly afraid to move. Urgently drawn, yet afraid to look again lest I should see something horrible looming suddenly between those curtains.

I wondered if the others had felt it. A sharp silence had fallen.

Odollee was stitting very still, her hands grasping her purse. I wondered why she did not say something. And yet what could she say when she had just been told that the man she claimed for her father had been dead thirty years? How explain her pathetically absurd position?

The men were waiting. And their faces expressed pity rather than indignation. Such is the power of beauty, I thought . . . Already they have cleared her. They believe, as Louis said, that she has been imposed on. Not that she is an adventuress.

LOUIS broke the silence. "Miss—Meynard comes to us with an amazing claim. She tells me—but perhaps you had better do the talking." He turned to Odollee.

Odollee opened her purse. "I have two letters from my father which you may see. There is also one from him to your father; though he said he would himself——"

The hall portieres parted and the baleful old negress appeared in the door.

"Fo' mo' plac' fo' dinnah?" she inquired of the young men.

"Yes, Sanchez, please," John said. "Four places. You have the gentlemen's rooms ready. Will you——"

"Lady room, too. Me show all ready the room on top side de roof."

John gave Louis a glance of inquiry as if to question him about putting us on the roof. But Louis' eyes were on the fire.

"Me do," said the old savage. She pointed to Odollee. "She say coom on Va' by Mist John. Me I fin' top side room mo' nice. Me tek dere."

"Quite right, Sanchez. They are the pleasantest rooms in the house. Newly furnished," he smiled at us, "and warmer than the lower rooms."

The woman gave Odollee a straight and I thought significant look. "Yo' coom now fo' unlock trunk. Me I have dress press fo' dinnah."

Odollee looked surprised.

"The young ladies will be up presently, Sanchez," said Louis.

Still the old woman stood looking at Odollee as if expecting her to come at once.

"Did you hear me, Sanchez?" demanded Louis sharply.

"Me no deaf," retorted the old creature with equal sharpness, and without moving.

THE TWO older men sat facing us on the opposite side of the hearth. John stood behind Scarecrow's chair and Louis leaned on the mantel facing us across the hearth. I alone sat beside Odollee and saw her smooth out a scrap of paper behind the big square lid of her purse. She seemed merely to glance at it, then closing her purse said:

"I have left the letters in my room. If you'll excuse me a minute I'll go up and get them." The hall portieres fell together and the old woman was gone.

"Sanchez raised us," said John apologetically, "also our father and his twin, Uncle Pierre, and thinks she is privileged to rebuke us. You see, our mother died at our birth, and Sanchez has been a mother to us; hardly a servant."

Odollee had risen.

"I'll be right back. You wait here, Jackie," she said hastily, as though afraid I'd follow her. But I was too stunned to follow her.

I knew the letters were in her purse. Indeed, they were lying on top of the little tray. I had seen them while she surreptitiously read Sanchez' note. The woman had, without a doubt, been listening behind the portieres and had appeared just in time to prevent Odollee's making disclosures about herself. Her request that Odollee come upstairs had been a command.

How shrewdly the girl's mind acted. To have left the room at that moment to get a dress out for dinner would have been absurd. But to get the letters—quite natural.

And she had lied easily. Had she lied to me about herself also? Was the tale she told me of her Unknown Father the swift fabrication of a clever brain?

As the portieres fell behind her, a little door flew open in a clock on the mantel and a bird hopped out,

gave one shrill cuckoo to mark five-thirty and hopped back.

CHAPTER XI

FINE LINEN AND FAINT PERFUME

UPON Odollee's sudden and inexplicable leave-taking nobody spoke. Whether the men thought it strange that she must run upstairs for those letters before even offering an explanation of our presence, I did not know. But knowing what I did, it was not only surprising, but I thought foolishly—unless Odollee knew more than she had told me.

Why should that old Malay negro be passing her surreptitious notes? Commanding her presence upstairs? And more puzzling still, what was in it which was so urgent and compelling? For urgent it must have been to take Odollee away just then. And compelling, to make her feel that an old negress' word was of prime importance at that moment of tension and suspense.

After a space Louis who I was to learn rarely lost his *savior faire*, asked John about the trip from New Orleans. But as that trip included Odollee and myself, there seemed nothing to say as Louis quickly saw, and he changed the subject.

He began telling about the activities on Le Petit Isle, explaining to me that thirty years previously the smaller island had adjoined the larger, a bayou cutting deeply into the land from Baratania Bay. One of the big blows, which were common to these islands, had sundered Meynard Isle, the Gulf slicing the land away between it and the bayou.

The smaller island had been swept clean of trees as well as of human life, there being a large negro settlement on it at that time, and Mr. Meynard, Sr., not to lose the use of his land which was now a sand

waste, had converted it into a resort for people who liked to rough it, bathe and fish. There were guests winter and summer, often all the cottages and every room in the hotel being taken.

He told several amusing stories about happenings of the past three days. I could not but admire the gallant way in which he bore the burden of a conversation eliciting no response and but little encouragement.

I kept watching the door. What was keeping Odollee? She was gone so long that I began to grow uneasy.

Louis was detailing a hunting trip with some of the guests on La Petit Isle when the little cuckoo hopped out and, with a startling loudness, announced the hour. At the same time a gong sounded.

"That's the dinner gong," said Louis, his eyes going to the door as if to question, for the first time, Odollee's delay.

She had been gone a half hour! "I'll go get Odollee," I said. "She may have gotten lost in one of your subterranean passages."

"The house is large," he replied with a smile, "and the halls are confusing."

But he knew as well as I did that all the narrow passages of the upper floor led to the big one, where she could not miss the yawning cavity of the lower stair. Also that nobody could get lost for a half hour in the biggest house with servants about. I hurried out.

THE little Chinaman who had closed the front door after our entrance was throwing a log on the hall fire. He straightened up to smile and bow.

"Mebby so, make laugh ol' Malay loman to-da'. Nebel see laugh. Velly bad—ol' Malay loman."

I paused in surprise, and he slid

swiftly and noiselessly toward me in his dragging grass sandals, holding to each of his wrists as if afraid they might escape from his loose satin sleeves.

He whispered confidentially, "Malay loman, cally knife." He made a significant gesture across his throat, rolled his eyes upward with a dying expression, then smiled amiably as if expecting appreciative understanding. "Velly ole. Niggel say deb'l."

His description and secretive air would have been amusing in other circumstances. As it was I thought wildly of that surreptitious note slipped into Odollee's hand, her response and continued absence.

I broke into a mad dash across the paved floor, the hairy rugs skidding over smooth stones under my feet; but, keeping my balance, I gained the stair. Down the upper hall I rushed and into one of the little passages. I missed the way and had to turn back.

The second passage proved correct. The circular stairway was both high and dizzyingly steep but I went up in a breath and made for our rooms at the far end of the parapet.

The door was closed. I heard a man's voice inside. Muffled by the thick door, but without doubt a man's voice.

I grasped the doorknob. Locked. My knees gave. Then Odollee called out, "Who's there?"

"Me," I answered faintly, too relieved to think of grammar.

There was a pause. Silence . . .

She opened the door and my eyes swept the room. Empty. "Odollee, who was in here with you?" I demanded. "And what do you mean by staying like this and scaring me to death?"

"I'm sorry if you were frightened, little Jackie," she said softly.

THEN I noticed that an amazing change had come over her. She had been weeping—terribly. Her hair was disheveled, her face was soiled and red around the eyes. But she was smiling. Smiling. And never have I seen such a smile.

She made me think of the pictures of those aloof Hindu philosophers, except that she was white; or of what a Chinaman would be like if he had beautifully chiseled Caucasian features to mask his look of inscrutable wisdom.

In the smile she now turned on me, it was all there. The wise inscrutability. The wall of reserve. And more. Determination was in the upright rigidity of her body. Her somnolent eyes were narrowed, gleaming. Calm as her smile was, it conveyed to my actor sensitiveness an impression of bitterness and—cruelty.

"Odollee, who's in here with you?" I demanded.

She made a gesture covering the room. "Don't be silly, Jackie. You can see for yourself there is no one."

"I can see there's nobody in *this* room," I said meaningly.

"Go look in the other." Still smiling.

I hesitated. If she didn't want me to know—

"Go on," she urged. "Otherwise you will never be convinced."

I went. Looked in both closets. The bath. Under the bed. Behind the dresser. In the wardrobe and even in a cedar chest piled with cushions for a seat.

Nobody anywhere. I went around and once more tested all the bedroom windows. The one in the bath. All solid iron or steel. No opening anywhere except between those cunningly slanted shutters through which one could scarcely pass a hand without fear of getting it caught.

"Well?" Odollee was still standing

by the door when I came back, smiling that hateful, inscrutable smile. "Satisfied?"

"No, I'm not," I snapped. "But go wash your face. And come on downstairs. The men are waiting on you and I've got enough of this place."

SHE went into the bath and I sat down on the divan to wait. I was too confused to think. My mind was filled with the strange pictures of Odollee holding the door open as I entered. Disheveled . . . But smiling. Still standing there upon my return from the bedroom . . . Then at the end of the divan I saw a man's handkerchief. I picked it up. It was of very fine linen and breathed of an expensively delicate perfume.

I jumped up. In a flash it came to me. The divan was one of those deep affairs with a very high back and high ends. It sat cat-a-cornered before the fire, one end extending toward the centre of the room, the other toward the wall at the far side of the hearth—with ample space between the high couch end and wall for a man to crouch in if he were not fat.

And the man who carried fine linen handkerchiefs breathing of expensively delicate perfume would not be fat. With me safely in the bathroom he had but to cross the hearth and pass out the door which was in the same wall as the fireplace. Very simple.

WHEN Odollee returned, her eyelids whitened and all trace of her recent disturbance removed, I rose without a word and started toward the door.

"Jackie."

I stopped. She was looking at the handkerchief which I had left on the couch.

"You have loved me and trusted me enough to come into most disturbing circumstances with me. I

do not forget this. And I must ask you to trust me a little while longer—perhaps more than you will ever be called upon to trust anybody again.

"If you wish, of course, you can take the next boat back to New Orleans. I shall remain. I want you with me; but I shall not blame you if you go. I can't explain to you now. All will be clear when the right time comes.

"This much I can say—a great wrong has been done in this house—a wrong so terrible, so shocking and dastardly that it seems unbelievable. And I am here to right that wrong. No, not to right it. That can never be done—now. But to assist in bringing about a belated justice.

"I can also say that you are safe here. This is Meynard Isle, Meynard House. The man who shouted at me from the window is my uncle. The two young men are my cousins. Whatever you hear, whatever you see, whatever happens—no matter how frightening, you need not be frightened. No harm will come to you."

"What about you?" I asked.

"Nor to me—I believe. Though as to that——" She shrugged. "No matter. To right the wrong that has been done is all that matters."

"So you think it wouldn't matter to me if you were murdered or disappeared or something."

She had said all this standing very still by the divan, her heavy eyelids lowered. Now she looked up and smiled in her old way, sweet yet faintly mocking.

"That won't happen, I assure you, whatever else does. My person is safe, whatever befalls my soul. And you are safe; soul and body. I swear that." Adding, with a hint of mischief, "unless one of the equinoctial storms should carry you away. And, of course, it's too early for their pirating. This is May. They are due

in August. By that time all this will be settled and I promise you that as soon as it is, you shall ask me what you like, and I will tell you everything.

"Until that time, you must take me on faith, asking no questions. Or—you can go back to the convent if you prefer. I hope you won't choose that."

I must ask no questions; or go. Well, a convent in summer time is not an exciting place for a young girl, and though this place promised more excitement than either the youth or the actor temperament in me demanded, as long as Odollee knew "where she was at" and seemed so sure neither of us was in bodily danger before August—I didn't care for her remark about the insecurity of her soul; after all a soul is an intangible thing, and if she wanted to take chances with hers—it was her own.

Moreover, recalling a remark she'd once made about wanting to lie down in the street and let her beloved father walk on her, I felt that she might be, when deeply moved, given to an extravagance of speech.

"I'll stay," I said after brief consideration of the two alternatives.

She came swiftly to me and flung her arms around me. I was surprised, as she is the most undemonstrative girl I have ever seen. Indeed, my own affectionate advances had been met by such embarrassed yielding that I had been entirely discouraged.

"Jackie, you are an angel," she said. "And also you have in you a little of the devil's bravery. Let's go down."

WHEN we reached the second floor she stopped. "Jackie, you must not fall in love with either of my handsome cousins. It might mean—would be almost sure to mean tragedy."

"You acted on the train as if you were already falling in love with John," I laughed. "In fact, when I accused you, you didn't deny it. You don't want both of them, do you?"

Her eyes grew luminous. "Ah, John." She sighed deeply. "He is very handsome. I could love him. But whom I love or do not love is of no consequence in the working out of my destiny.

"I am consecrated to—hate. And also to a great love. My course is fixed. Heartbreak cannot alter it. But with you it is different. You must not love amiss. And for you to love either John or Louis Meynard would be to love tragically amiss."

I laughed at her. Actors are a lot more practical in matters of the heart than folks give them credit for. They know themselves better than any other people do because their whole stock is themselves and they give a good deal of thought to the stock.

They don't let themselves fly off in a tangent of emotionalism over anybody until they've turned the advisabilities over in their minds. They make mistakes in love, of course—lots of them; but not mistakes of blind impulse. That's why they recover quickly. They have their emotions in the palms of their hands ready to mold and remold, just as they have their tears lying about ready for immediate use before the footlights.

"Don't worry," I said. "Nothing doing for your handsome cousins a-tall! I wouldn't love a man who'd expect me to live in this God-forsaken place, on a bet. That's flat and final. I love life too well."

"Good." She was almost gay. And I knew that whatever the mystery of this house, there was no mystery here for Odollee. She knew.

"Whatever befalls my soul" and—"I am consecrated to—hate." Strange and disturbing words on

the lips of a girl like Odollee.

On my lips or those of any average girl they would have meant nothing—romantic twaddle. But she was not an average girl. And there had been in her voice, as she uttered them, purpose and grim determination. "You are safe, body and soul—as for me, it does not matter."

HAD she entered into some ugly, perhaps criminal plot which endangered her soul—maybe her body also? Or was she, as Louis had said being imposed on by someone who was experienced in intrigue?

"Odollee," I said, "you said you meant to stay here. How do you know you can? Your father is not—visible. And if he were—it seems to me that these men own this place. How do you know they'll let you stay—since your claim as a relation looks—well, sort of preposterous."

"Did you hear the man who proclaimed me an impostor pleading with me to go?"

"It sounded like that."

"Why didn't he order me to go?"

"Search me."

"He won't. Nor will his sons. Publicity, scandal is the one thing their pride cannot face. Even libelous scandal would be intolerable to them. The scandals of Stone Gables have always been adjusted within its walls. They would suffer blackmail rather than have publicity."

"My God, Odollee, you surely don't intend to blackmail them?"

"No. I intend to have only what is mine—one-half this estate."

"Good Lord! Why not all while you're about it?"

"Because only one-half belongs to me. My father and Henri Meynard were the only heirs. I have come to claim my father's share."

Ah, so that was it. She meant to try to prove that Pierre Meynard left a nearer heir than his brother and nephews. But how? She was too

young to be his daughter. And judged too old to be his granddaughter, if he had been Henri Meynard's twin. Evidently somebody had bungled.

"They will not let me go till this matter is settled," she was saying. "Even the sons, who know nothing about all this, realize that a girl claiming to be their uncle's heir must not be thrown out bodily. It is better that I have come here to make my claim than that I should have gone into court. They will even be grateful for that."

"But wouldn't it have been better to go into court—if you've got any sort of a case?"

"No." Her voice was suddenly cold. "I told you that we Meynards do not settle our private affairs in public."

Her head was arrogantly uplifted. Well——

CHAPTER XII

UNWELCOME GUESTS

PROBABLY disturbed by our delay, the eyes of the men rested questioningly on Odollee, and also admiringly. Whatever her business here, however absurd her pretensions, it was clear that they were pleased that she chanced, if an impostor, to be a beautiful one. My blonde prettiness was completely overshadowed.

Cool, self-possessed, she paused in the doorway as if to say: "Well, come on. Dinner is waiting." What she did say was: "I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting. I'm afraid dinner will be quite ruined."

I thought her apology positively insolent. Not a word of explanation. Not a word about the letters she had gone for, which would, if not explain, at least offer some excuse for our presence.

I was painfully aware of the fact that we had not been asked to din-

ner. But not she. So smiling, so obviously waiting for them to make a move toward the dining-room, as if she were the mistress of the house—they her guests.

John, who had not Louis' *savoir faire*, flashed an amazed glance at his brother, who looked as if this were exactly what she as a tardy dinner guest might be expected to say. But nobody made a move to interest in the "quite ruined dinner."

Doctor Blackman stroked and stroked his cadaverous face, staring into space. The Judge winked furiously at the fire.

ACROSS this pause came the distant call of a bugle whose clean, clear note was like no bugle. It shattered the hand of silence that gripped us and flung us into gelid space.

Louis' smile died without vanishing. Became the frozen grin of a man whom death had caught so sharply that the muscles had found no time for readjustment, its cold rigor fixing them on the instant in a horrid travesty of a smile. His black eyes, which were on Odollee, held her as if all at once she had become a horrid apparition. The other three men stiffened, their startled eyes falling away from one another, embarrassed, uneasy.

Again came silence. A curiously frightening silence. A terrifying tension had all at once been communicated to me.

I tried to think of something to say—words. Any words. It was as if all at once, without warning, sound had ceased in Times Square, traffic still surging helter-skelter—but voiceless. As if all sound had gone out of life and we were assailed by the impact of vacuum in which repressed utterance strove against reluctant thoughts secretive and deadly.

A sense of waiting for something unpleasant swept me—some im-

minent thing which speech might forestall.

It came. The thick stillness was broken by the sound of music drifting in from the gloom of the front grounds on which the library windows gave.

At first faint, fragmentary, the melody lifted flute-like, taking form yet muffled as though emerging from a closed room overhead. It was the *Appassionata*. The crescendos swept downward.

"There it is," said John. The old men exchanged glances.

"Whoever it is, can *play*," I said. "But what instrument is it?" I went on, relieved by speech, puzzled by their attitude—yet enthralled.

"Sounds like a cross between an organ and a flute. Not round enough for an organ and too much swell for a flute. Sort of as one would imagine a baby organ would play."

Nobody answered and I persisted. "What is it? Not an accordion?"

"We don't know," said John with an embarrassed laugh.

"You don't know! Why it's upstairs."

The music grew in volume, became a wild abandon of beautiful sound, which now seemed to come from among the treetops rather than the rooms directly overhead.

Odollee's pale face was lifted in rapturous attention as also was Doctor Blackman's. The Judge scowled at the brothers, who were visibly disturbed.

"So it is," he said, answering my question. "But, you see, the instrument is the musician's own invention, and he hasn't patented it yet, so it has no name."

It was a plausible explanation, and came readily; yet it did not account for the embarrassment and confusion it had produced in this room.

"What about dinner?" the old man went on. "Can't we let all this busi-

ness wait till afterward? I think folks can argue more effectively, if there is argument, above full stomachs. A cold snack is all right on a boat, but——"

John laughed. "Pardon us, Doctor; but I promise you Sanchez will see that it isn't cold."

LOUIS MEYNARD suddenly became the cordial host, his pale face, however, belying his smile.

"I'm glad you ladies didn't bother to dress." He started toward us. "The trip from New Orleans to the islands is frightful."

Offering Odollee his arm, he continued: "I wish somebody would see the possibilities of them as a resort and build a great railroad over Barataria Bay, like the Flagler road which reaches out from the mainland of Florida and connects it up with all the key islands."

We went in to dinner, followed by that marvelous music.

It descended in muffled crescendos, trailing into faint echoes like the terrified wails of a lost child; dropped to secretive murmurings of loveliness—rose tumultuously, a deluge of sound that shook the soul.

"My God," I said, forgetting that I was in "society," "that man or woman, whichever it is, *can* perform."

"Yes," said John, "he is a great musician."

"Then it's a man?"

John flushed; his eyes falling.

"Yes, a man," said Louis, his staccato speech acquiring the inciseness of dagger thrusts.

"Tut, tut, Louis." Evil Eyes laughed. "I'm surprised at an intelligent man like you. Ho! ho! ho!" His great shoulders shook with mirth.

Indignant color rose in Louis' pale face.

"Judge," broke in the Scarecrow, "it's a pity for a man who is crassly

ignorant to *expose* his ignorance at your age."

John was indicating our places at table, and Evil Eyes, catching sight of a roasted suckling pig, backed up by a goose with its browned legs trussed skyward, said mildly: "Doctor, this is no place for learning."

And it wasn't.

WHATEVER the quarrel these two had, whatever the mystery surrounding that musician and his music (for mystery there was, as their looks and words clearly indicated), whatever the mystery of Odollee, this was no place for any of it.

The twins sat opposite each other. Between them at the head of the table was a vacant chair for which they apologized saying their father was too ill to come down.

To use a slang expression, "you've got to hand it" to the Creoles. There must be something in this mooted question of old stock that makes for breeding which even education and culture can't generate.

When you stop to think of it, here Odollee was, come to try to tear them loose from half their big estate as they well knew. And instead of telling her to pack her doll-rags—a boat was waiting—or go on a hunger strike, we were treated like two swell society dames on an invitation visit.

Like Evil Eyes, I succumbed at a glance to this feast for the gods. Let the oceans rise up and the mountains fall down, what actress ever bothered about the hour after next if she found herself suddenly dropped into the middle of Vanderbilt-Astor doings? Certainly no small blonde actress with a large appetite and an ambition to see the inside machinery of the rich.

And such "dog" I'd never seen! Though I've eaten in some of the swellest hotels in New York.

I felt sure these men ordinarily

dressed for dinner. The business of eating here was too grand for informal clothes.

TWO black boys waited on us, and they seemed to know by magic when we were through with one course and ready for another.

The dining-room was wide, with exceedingly long-beamed ceiling and dark wood paneling. But under the lights the impression I had gained of it in twilight was dissipated.

In spite of its size and furnishings, which were old, heavy and black, the great candelabra over the table gave a festive air to the place. The rugs were in bright Oriental colors, and there was a veritable jewelry store display of silver and cut-glass on the big side-boards and on the table.

The walls were hung with portraits ranging from the time when men wore satins and laces and women wore goods enough to make a whole stock wardrobe, down to the days of padded shoulders for men and crinolined sleeves for women.

Scarecrow and Evil Eyes, as I had nicknamed the two old men on the train, I discovered through the conversation, were of considerable importance. The former was a Doctor of Science and a writer of occult books. The other, once a Judge, was now devoting himself to some work which I gathered had to do with logic as applied to crime and the uncovering of so-called mysteries. But I could not keep my eyes off the brothers.

The likeness of the two men was almost shocking. Their features were cast in an identical mold.

As far as coloring was concerned, John was slightly the darker. Yet now, with that tragic summer long past, I always think of Louis Meynard as the Black Twin.

Each had beautiful soft black hair,

with coppery lights, worn straight away from tanned and handsomely aquiline countenances.

But there was a sombreness about Louis which goes only with dark complexions. Even when he smiled there lurked a hint of loneliness or hurt in his eyes. It was, as I learned later, "the Meynard look," and had come to him from those far-off days when the Meynard mothers watched the sea for ships that never came home, and wept for the fathers of unborn sons.

John, while inheriting the marked nose, the strong chin and stern mouth of the Meynards, had caught the sunshine in his eyes, and he wore a fine, bold air which somehow made him look fairer. Both were charming. But the Eagle and the Hawk seem to me to characterize them as a multitude of words could not do.

NOT a word was said about the thing which was uppermost in all our minds. Of that magic serenade which went on and on no further mention was made. Only the serving black boys seemed aware of it.

From time to time, watching our plates, watching the old Malay savage who as high priestess of the occasion was presiding over a loaded buffet, watching each other as for moral support they would, as if against their wills, roll their eyes in swift darts toward the darkness outside the windows. And at every vaulting of sound they exchanged frightened glances.

But the high priestess gave them little time to indulge in flights of fancy. She never spoke to them, but they watched her much as they watched the dark windows, eagerly yet fearfully.

Their obvious terror of the music drew me from the high attitude of the Sybarite. A heaviness of spirit fell on me.

Our hosts tried to include us in the

general conversation; but Odollee and I were unversed in the small talk with which men and women of the world cover their thoughts, and for all Louis' efforts, talk languished in the course of a long, elaborate dinner.

Doctor Blackman and Judge MacCauley came to the rescue. They began with creation and rushed down the ages. It seemed impossible two heads could hold so much knowledge.

Also they disagreed on every conclusion, each flaying the other with facts; each appearing to prove his point absolutely and unanswerably until the other took hold and tore it to tatters.

THE cadaverous old doctor grew upon one. His face became almost lofty. His conversation was brilliant, though often obscure—which made it seem the more learned.

After listening to his arguments it was impossible to continue thinking of him as Scarecrow. His emaciated body became pathetic rather than funny. You felt that so absorbed had his mind been that his poor body had been hopelessly neglected—starved.

The Judge, also learned, was inclined to be fat. He was bald-headed and had a keen sense of humor as well as an irascible temper. The wicked wink which had so outraged me on the train, inspiring me to give to him the name of "Evil Eyes," was an affliction. The more excited he became, the more he winked.

In a rather heated but obscure argument I gathered that John had gone to New Orleans to enlist the aid of the two eminent old men concerning some mystery on the island which the Judge referred to as "this dastardly business."

That "this dastardly business" was unrelated to Odolee's presence seemed obvious since John had made the trip without any knowledge of her coming. Or had they known?

And had these men been engaged to meet us here?

Whatever the answer, I was now convinced that there was nothing underhanded in the presence of these old men. They were too cultured, too dignified, to have part in anything unsavory. Also I felt a nobility of spirit in John.

OF LOUIS I could not be certain. His eyes, which were large and dark, had a curious way of striking sharply at the person he addressed, seeming to bore directly into one's sight; then they would falter, slide away ever so little, coming back immediately as if by sheer force of will, to hold one in a gaze of determined, almost embarrassing steadiness. The defect was offset by a charming smile and a most engaging manner.

John's eyes turned constantly to Odollee's lovely, still face. If ever a man was hit, and hard hit, that man was John Meynard. I know the look.

And one thing was certain . . . neither of the brothers was worried over her claims. They probably thought she had been misled by some black sheep relatives; some bluffing blackmailer.

Though inclined to think some such thing myself, I knew that here was no bungling game to be easily thrust aside; but a deep laid plot, long and carefully planned. I wondered what would be Odollee's first move in the game she had been raised and educated to play.

CHAPTER XIII

CZARS OF THIS ISLAND



WHEN the elaborate silver dinner service had been removed the old Malay addressed John: "Yo' ha' yo' coffee *dans ici* or *dans libery*?"

"*Ici*," laughed John.

She disappeared, the two boys following. Presently one of them returned with the coffee wagon and Louis, asking Odollee if she would pour, directed the boy to place the service before her.

I watched her with misplaced agitation. She poured with the calm dignity of one accustomed to this rite, instead of the slap-dash manner of a boarding school.

Instead of handing the cups awkwardly across to us, she passed them to the boy who stood on her right. When all were served and cigars passed, Louis said: "That will do, Otto." And the boy left us.

"Now for it," I said to myself. "They waited to get rid of all the servants."

But I was unacquainted with these folk. They seemed to have nothing on their minds save to be entertaining and entertained.

"This house is built like a fort," remarked Judge MacCauley, winking at the heavy beamed ceiling and the windows set in walls that must have been two feet thick.

"It's built to do battle with the sea," John said. "Stone Gables was once a mile and a half from the sea on the south—now it's only a few hundred yards; but the island is two miles wider on the north. The sea destroys on one side and the river builds on the other. The islands are constantly changing shape."

He gave the Judge a light, while Louis performed the same service for the Doctor.

"I hope they won't have any reshaping while I'm here," I said apprehensively.

He reassured me. "Even if we do have a storm, this house is protected by the sea-wall of trees on the south and west. Their roots are tremendous and they are laced and interlocked in an almost unbreakable network deep down in the soil."

"I'm glad to know why they are there," I said. "I thought maybe you considered the front yard pretty. Looks like one of those deserted graveyards down in St. Mary's Parish."

I was beginning to think nothing was going to happen and I might as well enjoy myself. Even the overhead one-piece orchestra seemed merely part of the show.

"Ramparts are never pretty," smiled John. "Did you notice how they lean toward the north? Their trunks are bent by old man Sea-wind, but they stand together between him and the house." He spoke cheerfully, blowing a smoke ring.

BUT Louis, whose morbid temperament reveled in the awful beauty of the tragic, pictured to us that night long ago when the sea had heaped the bodies of men and cattle among the battered drift of upturned trees, floating corpses, and wrecked houses, splitting the island of Meynard in twain.

Odollee's eyes were suddenly full of horror. I wondered if he were trying to frighten her away. But that didn't fit in with their courtesy.

"My Lord," I said, "why do people live on these islands anyway when there's so much solid land?"

"There's always a chance of escape, you know," John laughed, "even if the worst happens. And it doesn't often. The hurricane takes an island now and then; but see how many remain. The islanders hope always that they will be of the remaining ones."

"Is the tower a sort of lookout for storms?" I asked.

"No. It's a lighthouse. The Gables was built when the Meynards were men of the sea. Maybe pirates," he added smiling, "and the tower light brought our own men home and was

of great service to ships lost in a storm.

"We no longer belong to the sea, but the maintenance of the light is like a religion with us. It can be seen for miles and is never dark except to mark the death in our house of its head.

"It is the custom that when the head of the House of Meynard dies," he continued, "that the light in the tower shall be extinguished at midnight; and for one hour all nearby ships shall ride the sea in darkness. By this sign the sailors know that the house has a new head, and send up a prayer for the departed one."

"What an odd custom," I said. "You Islanders are bound by all your old traditions, aren't you? As if you belonged to a foreign country."

"We do in a way. Conditions are so different here, we are so removed from progress—not even a telephone connection with far-off Terrebonne"; adding whimsically, "why, even the dogs on the island have lost their bark, as man is said to have lost his tail when he no longer had need of it for clinging to treetops."

"You're joking, I suppose, about their bark being *lost*," said the Judge.

"Not at all. Long ago when not even an occasional stranger came to the Island, they quit barking. Their offspring found neither example nor need of a bark. Finally the sound became unknown. They yelp for joy, squeal if hurt, and howl dismally at times to the great terror of the negroes who believe they foresee death or disaster—but they won't bark."

TWO young men in gilt frames, side by side, caught my eye. They belonged to a period about twenty-five or thirty years ago.

I was curiously impressed by the dark one. He was of slight build and of a distinctly foreign countenance,

clean cut, aquiline and proud. Yet, there was in his face a sweetness of expression irresistible even on canvas.

One felt in spite of his melancholy eyes that this man had found life good. His face radiated joyousness, mocking his sombre eyes, in which, also, a twinkling humor seemed hidden.

John caught me studying the pictures. "The dark one is Uncle Pierre; the blond, our father. They don't look like twins, do they?"

He gave Odollee a swift glance and dark color flooded his face. John Meynard's face was not so controlled, nor his speech so guarded as Louis'. I decided he was somewhat of a blunderer. But a delightful one. I liked him immensely. Louis turned the conversation.

"I hope Father will be with us tomorrow night," he said. Then indicating the empty chair at the head of the table: "Neither John nor I fill his place when he is not present."

"We don't know who has the right to fill his place in his absence," John added with a smile.

I looked at him inquiringly. And Louis said, a note of impatience in his pleasant voice: "You see, the older son is the head of the house after Father; but, thanks to the malice of our old Malay nurse, nobody knows which is the older—John or I. If she does, which I doubt, since we must have been very much alike as babies, she would cut her tongue out before she'd tell."

"You think it was malicious?" asked Doctor Blackman. "May have been accidental, you know, since, as you say, you were so alike."

"Oh, no. She boasts she did it on purpose to get even with Father for some fancied wrong."

"A rather tame revenge, eh?" chuckled Judge MacCauley.

"By no means," said John. "In the Meynard family, it's highly im-

portant in case of the first born being male twins to know which is the older.

"According to a law a property is not entailed in this country, but the Meynards have been Czars of this island for two centuries. And having no desire to see their kingdom cut up into small properties they have been a law unto themselves in the matter of inheritance. The entire island goes to the eldest son. I can't say that I think it a fair adjustment—great wealth for one son and poverty for the other."

"It's the only way of keeping our name from disintegrating as so many splendid old Louisiana names have," broke in Louis with asperity.

"For my part, I think the individual more important than a name," argued John pleasantly.

Louis smiled, but his black eyes flashed. "Well, the matter is not one for you or me to decide. That has been done for us. Our part is to live up to it as a point of honor."

"True," agreed John amiably.

"But how are you to live up to it in your case, if you don't know which is the older?" asked Judge MacCauley.

"As our——" John stopped short.

"As our ancestors in the same circumstances settled it," Louis said, taking up John's broken sentence.

"You don't mean to say the same circumstance has arisen before?" I cried.

LOUIS seemed not to hear.

After a brief hesitation John said: "Once. Twins are rather usual in our family. And the nurse who mixed us to spite Father had, years before, played the same sardonic joke on his father."

"She had been kept in the family after the first deviltry?" demanded the Judge.

"Yes," answered John, his eyes on

his coffee cup. "But in the first case she was undoubtedly prompted by love. Grandmother died in giving birth to father and Uncle Pierre.

"Grandfather was at sea. He carried on a considerable trade at that time with South America and the Indies. The babies were three months old before he ever saw them. Sanchez worshiped both. She was like a mother to them, and she claimed it had been an accident."

I wondered if this bit of family history were being given casually, to make conversation, or if some purpose lay back of it.

The Judge seemed to look upon it as important. "Why haven't we heard this before, John?"

"Why, I don't know. It's no secret. Anybody could have told you about Father and Uncle Pierre, and also about ourselves."

"I think I did hear something about it at the time of your uncle's death," mused Doctor Blackman. "Unfortunate circumstances of some sort. I don't recall what, exactly. It's a long time ago, and the islands were more remote then than now. The canal is a great thing for you islanders in reducing distance."

Doctor Blackman pushed his chair back. "Well, I suppose we may as well——"

"We'll be more private in the library," said Louis, rising.

IN GLORIOUS ascent the music died, its death a tortured and torturing cry. Rising and ever rising, it ended on a note of unimaginable brilliance.

The young men exchanged glances of unmistakable relief. Judge MacCauley applied himself to his cigar with determined concentration. Doctor Blackman turned his peering, thick-lensed gaze upon the darkness outside and nodded with an air of satisfaction: "There's no mistake

about it. Such music is not of the earth."

"Who is it?" I demanded. "Not an amateur, that's certain."

There was a pause. Then Louis said loudly, like a small boy hiding fear behind defiance: "It's the Ghost of Stone Gables."

"The what?"

"The ghost of Stone Gables. That's what anybody on these two islands will tell you. Believe it or not according to your temperament."

Everybody laughed constrainedly excepting Odollee, who wore a faintly mocking smile.

"Well," I said, "if you give me a choice, I choose to believe the Ghost is a mighty fine flesh and blood musician who is wasting his sweetness on the Delta air."

"Sensible girl," chuckled Judge MacCauley, giving me one of his notable winks.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SACRED CAT'S EYE



IN THE red library a change came over the pleasant, casual men. They smoked almost in silence, making brief comments now and then to fill in awkward pauses. Clearly they were waiting for Odollee to begin. And since she seemed to me the aggressor I couldn't see how she could avoid it—and stay on in this house uninvited. We couldn't just chat till bedtime, then say good-night and go up to bed. But it began to look as if that was her intention.

Finally John spoke.

"My brother tells me you claim—that is, you evidently believe yourself to be the daughter of our Uncle Pierre Meynard, who has been dead thirty years. Looking at you, I feel, and Louis as well as Judge MacCauley and Doctor Blackman agree with me, that you have been imposed

upon by—possibly some renegade Meynard for reasons which we can't guess until you make your position clear.

"You may speak frankly before the Judge and the Doctor. They are here to clear up other matters which we found so inexplicable and disturbing that we were compelled to do what the Meynards have never before done—call outsiders into family matters."

"Perhaps," said Judge MacCauley, "what you have to reveal may be a key to the whole mystifying business."

"I didn't know what the position of these gentlemen was in the matter," said Odollee, lifting her eyes. "It was that I wanted to know first." I never saw any one so self-possessed. She kept me gasping.

"Of course," said John. "We should have thought of it at once."

WITH her eyes on her quietly folded hands she told them her story as she had told it to me, omitting only that her father's messengers had been an old Malay woman and a Chinaman.

"Then you did not know until today that Pierre Meynard was dead, child?" asked Doctor Blackman kindly.

She hesitated. "Yes, I knew. But, of course, that doesn't alter my situation, since he—died—was killed only sixteen years ago."

"Ah! I see." The Judge's face hardened.

She spoke as calmly of her father's death as if she had not an hour ago expected to find him here alive. That she was lying I was convinced. It was impossible that she would have taken it like that.

The man who'd commanded her presence upstairs was her father. But who was he? And if honest, why did he not come out in the open?

She opened her purse and, taking from it the little black box, passed it

to Louis, who was nearest her.

"The ring was left to me by my father," she said. "You know how he came by it, I am sure."

LOUIS opened the box and looked at the ring a long time, his face growing paler and paler. Finally, without speaking, he handed it to John.

John said, after a pause: "It must be the ring. The stone is a freak. It seems impossible that Nature could have repeated herself so exactly."

"Possible, of course," said Louis, who was standing beside his brother studying the ring, "but most improbable. If the stone isn't genuine it is a marvelous imitation."

He took the ring from John's hand and passed it to Judge MacCauley. "Judge, you have the finest collection of semi-precious stones in the country, I'm told. Is that stone genuine?"

The Judge jumped up excitedly. "The Sacred Cat's Eye. It was once the central stone in the crown of one of the Ptolomies. It was believed to be the petrified eye of a sacred cat and it has been stolen and recovered by the Ptolomy descendants over and over.

"It has caused more wholesale slaughter than any semi-precious stone in the world. It isn't a semi-precious stone only because of its peculiar formation and history; it is worth anywhere from two hundred thousand to a half million dollars. It's been lost for two centuries now—where did it come from? Where did your father get it?" He addressed Odollee.

"From the Meynard estate. The ring rightly belonged to his brother Henri."

"Miss—Meynard," said Louis coldly, "I don't think you realize just what you imply."

There was a little silence. Then John said: "Miss Meynard" (I noticed he did not hesitate before pro-

nouncing her name as Louis had), "how you or any one could be in possession of that ring is amazing in the extreme."

"The ring must be an imitation," cried Louis.

"This is the genuine stone," broke in the Judge, who was bending to the light to examine it. "How did it come into the possession of the Meynards?" he asked, clearly uninterested in Odollee's history.

"THE jewel came into our family," said John, "through the marriage of one of our ancestors to the daughter of a pirate who occupied an island in Barataria which has since been wiped out by storm—completely submerged.

"Our ancestor was a rather wild young man—a younger son, and poor as all our younger sons are, unfortunately. He was also of an adventurous spirit and joined this pirate band.

"Soon afterward he married the Captain's daughter. She gave him the ring which her father had given her. Just before his son was born he was knifed by his father-in-law. The jewel came in time to his son, who also met a violent death.

"For about a century it continued in that branch of the family, apparently always bringing disaster to its possessor. Finally, this branch being extinct, it came to our branch. And as it had come through the mésalliance of a younger son, it was agreed that the jewel, which was a fortune in itself, should descend to the younger sons of the house as their share of the estate, though they were not to part with it under penalty of death.

"The last rightful owner of the ring was Uncle Pierre. It fell to him as the younger son."

The Judge looked up. "I understood you to say your father and

Uncle were mixed in infancy as you and Louis were and that you didn't know which was the older son."

LOUIS' eyes flashed angrily. "Sanchez later confessed that she did know."

"How much later?"

"When they were fifteen."

"And if she now came forward with a statement as to which of you two is the older son, you'd accept her word for it? One of you would quietly step out of his inheritance upon her identification?"

"No," said John. "We were undoubtedly very much alike as babies. She couldn't possibly know in our case. But there's no doubt that she did in theirs, because one was very large and fair, the other small and dark.

"She said she had lied about not knowing because she loved both and could not bear that either should suffer poverty. As there was no question of her devotion to them, there was no reason for doubting her explanation. It was a thing a mother might have done to save one of her babies."

"Why did she later acknowledge she knew?" asked Doctor Blackman.

Louis frowned. "Her reasons have no bearing on the case. The important fact is that she did acknowledge Father as the heir—on her oath."

Judge MacCauley said sternly: "If you enlisted our services merely that we might be witnesses to certain mysterious happenings, and to evade truth, you are barking up the wrong tree. For my own part, you may take me back in the morning."

"Of course, Judge, we want the truth," interposed John.

He hesitated, then continued: "The old mid-wife who attended our grandmother lived in New Orleans. She had been with grandmother several months before the twins were born

and after grandmother's death went back home.

"Father and Uncle Pierre had a private tutor till they were fifteen. Then Grandfather took them to New Orleans to put them in school, and one day ran into the old mid-wife, whom he'd been unable to locate.

"Having little hope that she would remember, but thinking their complexions might aid her, he took the boys to see her. She at once cried out: 'Ah de young one he mo' big! He mo' big den, he mo' big now. Dass so, yes!'"

John paused, then went on with evident reluctance.

"Grandfather quizzed her for an hour. Cross-examined her, tried to shake her by throwing doubt on her memory, but she stoutly maintained that the first baby born had had black hair, and had been very small and so dark and still she had thought he was dying of strangulation.

"The fair baby had been born a half hour later. And she could never forget him because of her surprise. She had been working over the black baby, as she called Uncle Pierre, and had been astonished that the next one should be so big and fair and lusty.

"She said she spanked him and told him he had almost killed his brother before birth—by being so big. Also, she declared that Sanchez, who had been working with her to save the dark baby, lied when she said she had forgotten.

"She couldn't have forgotten because the first was so puny, they were so worried that he would die, and they laughed so at the second one for almost killing his brother.

"WHEN grandfather came home he told Sanchez he had discovered his heir, and accused her of knowing all along. She immediately acknowledged it; but swore on all her heathen gods that father was the first born.

"It was true he had been black, because he had been so large he had almost strangled in birth. True that the second baby had been small but also he had been very pink and bald-headed, which may have given the mid-wife the idea that he was fair. So it rested.

"Grandfather did not know any more than he had in the beginning. Each woman was equally positive. Each swore to her story.

"In such circumstances Grandfather should have divided the estate; but he was an arrogant man, a slave to his name and traditions. At the same time he was just. He was not willing to take the responsibility of deciding on the conflicting evidence of two negro women a question which would make one of his sons practically a pauper.

"He had them taught fencing. And he dictated that they were to make the decision themselves with their swords after his death. Not a duel. Really a fencing bout.

"The first to draw blood would be the heir. He made them promise on their oaths that they would stand by that decision and not appeal to the courts to settle the matter."

A SILENCE fell. I felt that the two old men were waiting, as I was, for the climax to that strange, Old-World story. Louis must have felt it too. He said:

"Uncle Pierre perished the night of the great storm." He avoided Odollee's eyes, which were fixed on him inscrutably.

"Before the duel?" asked the Judge.

"No, afterward." With a note of impatience he added: "Father had won in the contest." It was as if he had said:

"Uncle Pierre's death in no way benefited Father. The question had been settled in Father's favor before Uncle Pierre's death."

"A ridiculous way to settle a question of inheritance," commented the Judge.

"The strange thing, Judge," said John, with an air of apology for his brother, "is the reappearance of that ring. It was buried thirty years ago with Uncle Pierre. Father hoped in this way to rid the family of its curse."

"Nothing strange about that. Louisiana vaults, being overground, are very accessible."

"Uncle Pierre was not buried in the family vault, but in a separate tomb of brick and cement which could not have been opened without demolishing it. And I had occasion to see it yesterday," said Louis.

"It was the anniversary of Grandfather's death, and I went with Father to take flowers. Uncle Pierre's grave is just behind the tomb. It had not been disturbed. It is black with thirty years of sun and rain but otherwise unmarred."

JOHN pulled a heavy cord hanging by the fireplace, and almost immediately Sing Lou appeared.

"Tell Sanchez I want her."

"Les-sel." The little Chinaman shuffled out, his hands clasping about his wrists.

Doctor Blackman and Judge MacCauley talked together about a recent murder in New Orleans which seemed to be baffling the police, and the Judge's wink appeared every second. They were clearly making talk.

Sanchez came through the hall door. Her gaunt form appeared even more massive than I had at first thought it. She stood rigid, her hoop earrings quivering against her savage old face. Her beady eyes held John. There was none of the obsequiousness of the servant waiting for orders, but rather she looked like a black soldier standing guard over us.

"How is father resting, Sanchez?"

"Goo'. Soun' sleep. See no ghos' to-nigh'. Dead sleep. Be all righ' to-morrow."

"That's fine. Sanchez, did you ever see this before?"

As her eyes fell to the ring her hand lifted, the first and last fingers extended horn-like. Her gaze was swiftly withdrawn. She made a strange guttural sound and her lips moved rapidly as in some prayer or formula against evil.

"I see you know it," said John.

"Yes. Me know. Devil eye. Me know," she said harshly without looking in his direction.

"Where did you see it first?"

"Little Missie, you' gra'ma ha' w'en she die.

"In coffin on he han'—Ah! Sha! Sha! Sha!" She screamed, broke into unintelligible imprecations and left the room without permission.

"It always excites her like that at mention or thought of Uncle Pierre," John said.

"I wouldn't have such an old hag around," snorted Judge MacCauley. "But she knew the ring instantly and made the sign of the devil's horns at it."

A silence followed. Impelled against my will, I stole a furtive glance at Odollee.

What must she be feeling, thinking? What did she *know*? Her eyes were downcast, a faint smile touched her lips. So faint that only I, who knew her, could have detected it.

CHAPTER XV

THE GHOST OF STONE GABLES

T some time during all this talk I became aware of music—aware that I had been hearing it, yet not hearing it all along. Even now I must strain to hear, so faint, so far was it—the merest ghost of sound.

I could not even be sure that it

was not an illusion due to nerves and the memory of our shockingly gorgeous serenade.

I wondered if Louis Meynard had been serious in saying it was a ghost. The idea was absurd. Perhaps that was his brand of humor.

As I was trying to hear above the rumble of men's voices, Odollee lifted her head in an attitude of listening. "Ah," she breathed. Instantly conversation stopped.

Yes, there it was, but coming from a great distance, many of the strains lost.

Finally Doctor Blackman said: "I take it that until certain questions are settled the young ladies are to be—that is, in the circumstances, there is no need for secrecy where they are concerned. If they are to be your guests, as I take it, they are——"

"I hope so," said John quickly and with evident sincerity. "Not only because they will brighten the house for us, but in view of Miss Meynard's mission and the—ah—strange evidence she brings, I feel that her place is here till the whole mysterious business is cleared up."

"Her presence is imperative," snapped the Judge.

Louis said nothing, and I felt he could easily have dispensed with us.

"Then don't you think," Doctor Blackman went on, "that they should be apprised of our mission here? They would hear stories from the servants. Moreover, there are certain points I should like to go into more fully concerning this mysterious visitor."

"You are right, Doctor," said John. "It's only fair that they should know what to—expect. For while they may not be disturbed—still——"

HE turned to Odollee. "Miss Meynard, due to certain inexplicable oc-

currences in this house, I went to New Orleans this week to enlist the aid of Doctor Blackman, who is an authority on occultism, and of Judge MacCauley, who disagrees with every principle the doctor sets forth, claiming that so-called spirit phenomena can be disproved by material evidence.

I am not superstitious, and I have no wish to frighten you; but you may as well hear from us, as from others, that Stone Gables is supposedly haunted."

He laughed embarrassedly. "We haven't the slightest idea where that music comes from. It isn't in the house. As nearly as we can localize it, it's in the front grounds, though as a matter of fact it seems rather to come from the sky. For a long time it was believed to be in the tower; but it isn't. It's among the trees. That's as near as we can place it. It comes from various directions."

"Nonsense. Nonsense," sputtered the Judge.

Doctor Blackman smiled indulgently. Then to me: "I deem it a great privilege to be a guest of this house. Not only do I expect to convert my friend the Judge, who is a stubborn materialist, but to add something to the Science of Spiritism. This musical spirit not only inhabits the trees but the house itself."

"Utter rot. I want to be put in the haunted room," snapped the Judge. "I'd like a hand-to-hand encounter with this ghost."

"There is no haunted room," broke in Louis, whose nerves seemed to be in a rather bad way. He began pacing the floor. "The thing—whatever it is—is all over the house. And barred windows, locked doors make no difference to it."

He spoke excitedly, addressing

the Doctor, who was in sympathy with the idea of it.

"When Father's health began to fail under the shock of these nightly visitations, John and I fixed up two rooms on the roof for him. Believing he was the victim of imagination, we had special blinds made—solid steel—and set in the stone casings of the windows.

"We bricked up the two outside doors, and in the ore entrance we put a heavy batten door with iron bands, two inside bolts and a lock, to give him an absolute sense of security. He was forced to move back downstairs."

"He saw the Ghost or Spirit *inside* the room?" inquired Doctor Blackman, his pale eyes glistening behind the thick lenses.

"Yes, and we saw it. Convinced that *nothing* could get into those rooms, that it must be a hallucination, John and I, to satisfy ourselves and Father, took up watch one night in the dark living-room.

"Father went to bed, turning out the lights. The place was pitch-black. I was beginning to get drowsy when Father called to us in a half scream.

We dashed into the bedroom and *saw it*. . . . It's no wonder Father's nerves are gone, his health breaking. . . . My God, what a Thing! . . . At our entrance it seemed just to go through the solid wall—or dissolve before our eyes. We lighted the lamp. But, of course, nothing was there."

I STOOD up, every hair in my head electrified. "That old Malay devil has put us in those rooms," I screamed.

"The rooms aren't haunted since Father left them," said John with a sad smile. "Both Louis and I have slept in them. Together and separately. Nothing happened. We have

frequently put guests in them, and have found that they are safe up there from the disturbances of the main house."

"Have you ever seen this visitor since?" asked the Doctor.

"Never since, nor before. But once was enough," broke in Louis. He buried his pale face in his slim hands. "Poor Father," he half sobbed.

"Evidently its business is solely with your father," mused the Doctor.

"Tut. Tut," muttered Judge MacCauley. "A materialization of some fear in his own mind."

"What about us?"

"Suggestion. Repeated suggestion. Without being aware of it yourselves, perhaps, you expected to *see* something in that room. Had your father ever told you what he saw—its form?"

"Yes."

"There you are. And you saw what his mind created through fear for himself, and through suggestion for you."

"Has your father any theory as to who it is that visits him? Or what it wanted?" Doctor Blackman asked, paying no attention to the Judge's theories.

"Yes, he thinks it is Uncle Pierre. And that it concerns his grave."

"What about his grave?"

"Well, you see, Uncle Pierre was a—suicide," said John hesitantly, "and Father seemed to have some religious prejudice against placing him in the family vault with his ancestors, who had all received the Last Sacrament of his church. So he buried his brother in a tomb to himself. Father thinks Uncle Pierre is outraged by the dishonor done his body."

"Then why don't you move him?"

"We wanted to. We've urged

Father; but he won't hear to it. Gets so excited at the mere mention of removal that we have given it up."

"Hum-m," murmured the Judge. "Just the sort of man to see a ghost."

"Well, what about this music?" demanded Louis. "Are you the sort of man to hear ghostly music because somebody suggested its presence?"

"Wireless. Plain as the nose on your face. Somebody has a receiving set rigged up in one of the upper rooms."

"Where does the music come from?"

"New Orleans—New York—easy to pick up anywhere."

"If that were the explanation there'd be a change sometimes," put in John. "A variety of instruments and players. There never is. It's the same instrument, the same class of music, the same performer."

"Then somebody on the island sends it."

"There's nobody on the island who is a master of music. The negroes play, but not like that. The Red-bones are not musical, utterly ignorant."

"Besides, you don't imagine we didn't think of that and comb the island before we decided to call in outsiders? Though we knew beforehand there was nobody capable of it. Our people are exceedingly primitive."

"How about visitors on Le Petit?"

"A shifting colony."

"Maybe from one of the other islands."

"The same class of people on the other islands. And we know all the land owners. No great musicians among them."

"Sure none of the house servants—"

"Quite sure. Besides, we've called

them all together while the music was playing."

"Combed the tower and trees for apparatus?"

"Yes."

NOW the sounds began to swell, as if the musician were drawing nearer. They seemed to circle the house, grower fainter, fainter, as if muffled by sudden enclosure. Languished. Then lifted far overhead in terrifying brilliance. Now passionate tides of melody, now low and gentle and filled with pathos. Or again wildly triumphant.

Judge MacCauley, without a sign of perturbation, continued his questions and cross-questions in a search for some logical explanation.

It seemed to me that Odollee was lost to the discussion, lost to all sound save those strange, lovely tones—which came from no instrument known to me. Yet being a lover of music and living in New York, I had heard, I thought, every civilized instrument and many uncivilized ones.

Doctor Blackman, too, was absorbed, giving no ear to the Judge's materialistic cross-examination. For my own part, it was as if I were disembodied, hearing all sound with astounding clarity. I missed not a note, nor a word that was spoken. And even fear was lost in awe of the beauty that flooded me.

"Well, one thing is certain," said the Judge, "*dead men make no music.*"

I now understood the words he had spoken on the boat.

Slowly the sounds began to die as if drifting off into a great void, drowned by distance. They ceased on a long, low wail.

Whereupon Doctor Blackman came out of his trance, and the two were off in the eternal battle between materialism and the occult.

"LOOK here," I said to John, "I don't want to be inquisitive; I believe, like the Judge, that all this has some simple explanation. But it makes a fellow feel a little easier in his mind when he's in a strange house to have the explanation. Is your father a musician?"

"He plays a variety of instruments," said John, "but nothing with any degree of skill."

"You don't think he may play some instrument well and have kept the fact to himself?" asked the Judge, picking up my cue.

"No. Why should he? Besides, he neither has the temperament nor the feeling for great music."

"Pierre was a musician?" interposed the Doctor.

"He had a great talent.—I might say genius. That's why Father is certain he is the musician of the trees."

"Just so," smiled the Doctor.

But I was not satisfied. "Have either you or Louis inherited his genius?" I asked.

There was a silence. Then John said: "Louis has."

Another silence. A sense of shock as that following a shot.

All eyes turned on Louis' pale face. He laughed stridently.

"You aren't trying to fasten that music on me, are you, Miss Tarver?"

"I'm trying to fasten it on anybody besides a dead man."

"Very sensible," murmured the Judge.

"But," interposed John in his quiet way, "his being with us disposes of that notion, though frankly, Miss Tarver, I, like you, would prefer to fasten it on some human agency. Even myself."

Then I threw a small bomb.

"His being with us disposes only of his present performance," I said impatiently. "It doesn't dispose of records he could have made and an accomplice to turn them on."

Judge MacCauley gave me a look of approval and admiration. "I see we are destined to be friends, little lady."

LOUIS stood up sharply, his dark face furious. "Why should I try to terrorize my own family and call in outsiders to watch me?" he demanded angrily of both the Judge and me, as though we were fellow conspirators.

"In my work I have found that there is no accounting for the vagaries of the human mind," said the old man, "no possibility which may be safely overlooked because of its unreasonableness."

"I don't believe you are the author of that music, Louis. Neither does our very sensible little friend. We merely deny the possibilities of its being a spirit performance and are catching every straw that drifts our way."

"Better withdraw personalities that may hinder us—or acknowledge by your sensitiveness that you are making a grandstand play and don't want the truth."

Louis' face had darkened till he was almost the color of an Indian. His eyes were jet black. But he stood still, hands clinched, jaw set, making a tremendous effort at self-control. Finally he said in a hoarse voice: "The truth—or—insanity. I can't stand it any longer."

"That's the boy," cried the Judge jocularly.

(To be continued)

Foxfire



By HAYNES TRÉBOR

THE woods smelled of a faint decadence. A musty perfumery whiffed from the warm ground and mingled in the sleepy atmosphere. The pinestraw was dry and crunched a little as the man and girl walked on it. A cricket hidden under it chirped in muttering tones.

There was a rift in the veil and a dull beam of light drifted through the pine trees; for a brief moment the shadows were gray, and then the veil was hastily redrawn.

The man felt the head of the girl move. Her hand had sought his fingers pressed to her waist as they walked close together. He felt her face lifted close to his cheek.

"Floyd?"

"Yes, Valma."

"Is it so—what that preacher said tonight?"

"What?"

She paused and her fingers caressed his. They spoke in voices hardly more than whispers. With all of the woods stretching about them, they alone in the midst of a world that might plunge away and be gone as though it did not know that they were alive, they instinctively spoke softly.

Every month a preacher came to the little settlement on Bayou Duce and delivered a sermon. His sermon varied but little. Sometimes his message was vague, disjointed and rambling.

He was an ardent little man whose eyes beamed with the fire of his devotion. If his hearers did not under-

stand, they were impressed; if they did not believe, they were at least frightened.

"Is what so, Valma?"

"What he said about—living after death."

The man was thoughtfully silent for a moment. Then: "I reckon 'tis, honey. Reckin so."

She was nodding. She stared ahead at the dimly outlined path they followed.

"But it seems sorta strange, don't it?"

"Yeah."

"He didn't mean ghosts?"

"No. Ghosts ain't real——"

"Spirits?"

"Well, kinda like thet. But he means a dif'rent kind o' spirit. He means—Yu seen foxfire, ain't you?"

The girl nodded.

"Well, thet's kinda like it. Foxfire comes from dead things—dead trees and leaves and sech. It ain't anything—nothin' thet yu can make out. In the daytime yu can't see it and yu can't feel it. But it's 'live, 'cause it glows. It's just a glow, but it's something. I reckon he means somethin' like thet."

He kicked at a rotting log, shattering the soft, damp bark. A tiny spot of wavy blue light glowed on one of the pieces that fell to the ground.

The man rubbed his foot in it and instantly the light had spread. It was a cold fire that had flamed up. It stuck to his shoe sole and everywhere he walked there was a splotch of the fire on the ground. When he rubbed his shoe the light spread more.

It marked his trail for some distance before its phosphorescence died out, and for some minutes his footprints glowed on the blackness of the woody carpet.

THE PATH which the man and girl followed approached a gully, thirty or

more feet deep. A shallow stream of water ran along its bottom, fed by a spring and emptying into the creek which became the log pond for the saw mill. They skirted the gully, following the path that circled it, and on to the hill above the spring.

There they came to the house—a two-room, clapboard affair on the "saddle-pack" style, typical of the backwoods: there were the two rooms on either side, and directly through the center was a "run" or porch.

The man unfastened the simple latch and pushed open the door. They went in and Valma lighted the oil lamp. There was a crude cheerfulness about the room, a symbol of the girl's effort to add something to their home.

They had been married only a little while, she and Floyd. The exuberance of her youth had not yet ceased to manifest itself; love with her had not yet become a reality. It was still romance.

Floyd was the foreman at the saw mill, a mile away there over on the creek. He was thirty and a "piney-woodser." The rosin from the trees that he cut had made permanent stains upon his big hands.

He had lived in these woods all his life, had grown with the trees. He was tall, heavy-boned, with hard cheek and jaw. But his mouth was full and boyish.

Valma had been the daughter of one of the millmen. Her father had been killed by a saw that burst one day and was driven through his chest as the pieces whirled through the air. Her mother had been already dead.

Valma was still young, although a fine dissimulation of the years is never evident to women of her type. Buxom she was with the harsh beauty of the timber, and her eyes were bright.

She had met Floyd in the day when she had brought her father's dinner

to him at the mill every day. While he ate it became a custom, in time, for her to walk with the foreman about the log pond.

Their conversation had not been free and easy, with light subtleties; but they had found topics to talk about, topics as simple as their environment. Floyd planned to buy an interest in the mill some day if the lumber concern that owned it would let him.

They had talked a little of love during the noonday strolls beside the log pond. They had come to understand that it was there. Floyd had come to the house back on the hill occasionally for supper with Valma and her father; Floyd stayed in the bunk house at the mill.

One night as he was leaving there had been a moment's silence between them; words had been swept away. Abruptly Floyd had caught the girl's shoulders and kissed her. He had felt her lips cling warmly to his.

After her father had been killed, they married and went to live in the shack back in the woods. It was lonely up there, but Valma said she didn't mind. Floyd was going to build another house soon, closer to the mill.

The girl was eagerly fond of her husband. Richer instincts than the drabness of her environment rose in her; life held promise, and its influence reacted on her. It pleased her to see that Floyd appreciated the little flounces she put about their house; the simple impulsive touches lent a warmth to the place that was reflected in their association. It staved away that dull bareness which comes so pitifully soon into the lives of women of the piney-woods.

WHEN Valma had adjusted the wick of the lamp and placed it on the table, she turned to the man and he caught her in his arms. He smiled down at

her and kissed her, and turned his head to hide the yawn.

"Hum—I'm sleepy, Valma," he said. "I'm kinda hungry, too, after thet jaunt. Reckin there's something to eat?"

"Might be. Want me to make some coffee?"

"Don't mind."

He sat down beside the table and watched her busy at the stove, kindling a fire for the coffee.

"Goin' to have a big cutting at the mill next few weeks," he said. "Reckin I'll have to take on a couple more men if I can git them. The company's makin' a lot o' big shipments of lumber now."

WEBB POWELL was a saw-mill man, when he cared to work and was sober. He was good at logging and could drive a crew of negro hands in feeding the mill as could no other man.

Webb Powell was, in a certain way, lord of his environment. He was as crude and rough as raw rosin. He had an enormous body and a foul tongue. His face had an evil leer that became disgustingly prominent when he was drunk: he was obstinate, mean, vicious-tempered, brutal, nasty.

He drank shinney with insatiable thirst and morose desire. He drank indiscriminately of the corn whisky, and the savageness of his nature mounted to dangerous proportions.

Webb was slightly drunk on this night.

The fire in the crude, open, clay-chimneyed fireplace burned with a torpid red glow, with a faint little purring noise, like a tawny drowsy cat, lulled by the steady downpour of rain outside. The wind, finding cracks in the walls, whistled through them.

Beside the fireplace Webb sat, his boots drying before the blaze, his hands spread on his knees. He had not shaved in many days and his

beard had not grown out evenly. It gave a lurid exaggeration to his heavy mouth and deep-set eyes. His neck and shoulders might have been those of an ox, yet his compact eyes suggested a half-cunning, half-stupid malignity.

He spat viciously. The woman paused for a moment in the doorway leading to another room in the house and stood gazing at him. She was tall, with bones to which her flesh clung like wet garments. Her lips were straight, ending in the peculiar little crinkled upturn at the ends so suggestive of those who have given the little that there was of themselves to the soil and received nothing in return.

A baby toddled about the floor seeking dirt and interesting things to eat. It discovered the man's shoes and would have played with them, but he pushed it away, gruffly.

"Webb," the woman said in a low voice, "won't yu go out an' git a couple of light-'ood knots fer the fire? There ain't no more wood in here an' it'll be chilly fer th' baby."

He did not answer.

"Please, Webb."

"Why don't yu put the damned brat to bed?" he growled.

"'Cause he don't go to sleep this early, an' if I put him to bed he'll fret."

"Ain't yu got him so's he'll mind yu yet?"

"I got a lot of work to do before I can go to bed, too. I've got to finish this quilting I'm doin'."

Her words were ignored. "I'll catch cold workin' here if the fire goes out."

Slowly the expression on the woman's face changed. In the lamp light her eyes flashed like a sunbeam striking a bright pebble at the bottom of a deep pool.

"Yu women are too frail," the man answered with sarcasm. "Can't work an hour without a fire a-roarin' in

front o' yu. I'm tired. Go git yuh own wood if yu want any."

HIS VOICE echoed in silence. The baby stopped its prattling and looked at the man. Then deciding that he might be worth investigating, it crawled beside him.

Its fingers caught onto the man's legs and the child was drawing itself up when the blunt hand of the man struck it in the face and it toppled to the floor. It whimpered and backed away.

Webb rose and kicked the burning pine logs with his foot.

"Yu got enough fire there to do yu. I'm goin' to bed."

The woman advanced toward him, the expression on her face more bitter and menacing. Her voice choked with anger.

"Webb, yu ain't got no feelin' fer me. Yu never do nothin' fer me, an' I slave here fer yu like a dawg."

He gave her a stolid glare. "Don't go complainin' t'night. I'm tired an' I ain't goin' to stand fer no arguin'."

The words were hissed at him: "Yu tired, Webb Powell? What do you ever do to git tired? Yu don't mind a baby an' tend a house an' a poor-land farm while yuh husband is away loafin' half the time around the saw mill or down at the village. Yu even go to Greenville."

"Why don't yu git tired of drinkin' thet shinney yu buys from them niggers at the mill? Why don't yu come home sober? Huh? Answer me thet!"

"Aw, shut up," he said.

She turned upon him with passionate fury.

"Don't yu tell me to shut up, Webb Powell. Don't you dare! What right have yu got to say anything to me? Yu been married to me a year now and it was jest the same as if yu wuz married to me before."

"Yu wuz goin' to give me so much,

and yu ain't even brought me a paper with some pictures in it to look at from all them yu must see down in the village. Yu sees things and I never see nothin'.

"And then yu come home here, drunk, and mean, and cussin', and sayin' I ain't got nuthin' to be tired about. Yuh been drinkin' tonight, ain't yu?"

"None o' yuh business! Git out o' my way. I'm goin' to bed. Do yu hear me?"

He tried to brush past her but she held her ground with stubborn defiance.

"Yu goin' to git me in some light-'ood knots, Webb, before you go to bed, or 'fore God in Heaven, I'll kill yu while yu sleep."

The baby had found a hatchet behind the stove. It was heavy, but the baby found that it had possibilities worth trying.

Its eye fell on the man's leg again; the thing seemed to have a sinister fascination. Summoning its full strength, the baby brought the hatchet sharply against the leg.

With a bellow of rage rather than pain, the man turned viciously upon the child. It was frightened and cried. The mother was saying something, but her words were instantly futile.

The great arm of the man came down, a paw caught the baby roughly by its shoulder and it was swung into the air. For a moment the man held it off at arm's length, quivering with his violent rage.

"Webb, put thet baby down!" the woman cried.

"Oh, goddamn——"

Webb slung the child from him with a quick, vicious motion of his arm—hurled it to the floor. It landed partly on its feet in front of the fireplace, but the momentum of being thrown propelled it forward, and the baby lunged into the flaming mass of pine knots.

It cried out and in an instant its scanty dress was ablaze.

THE MAN closed the door and set off in the rain.

The woman was still screaming and burning her hands in the fire. She pulled the baby from it and frantically beat at its flaming clothing.

She screamed on through the night, and when the next day had come she lay on the floor insensible. The fire in the open fireplace had burned out. . . .

AS WEBB plunged on through the rain his thoughts began to clear. His brain sobered and he began to reflect upon his actions of the night.

He realized fear—not a tangible fear from remorse. His crime did not trouble him in the least. But it occurred to him that there might be dire consequences if the sheriff found out about it.

Webb had a profound contempt for the sheriff and the law in general; but he knew that the officers would raise a fuss and it might be annoying for him. He decided that it would be best to get out of their way.

He came into Greenville some hours after midnight and made his way to the railroad tracks. A long freight was drawn up on the siding and two or three cars of lumber were being cut in. The train was headed south, for Mobile, or it might be going through to New Orleans.

Webb watched his opportunity and crawled on one of the cars. The uneven ends of the pile of rough-cut lumber made a comfortable and safe place of concealment.

Later in the morning the train crossed the rivers and was skirting the swamp area twenty miles or so above Mobile. Webb decided that it might be better not to go into Mobile, so when the train paused for a few minutes at a little saw mill station

called Hurricane he got off. He learned by inquiry that there were milling operations back of the swamp and up on the bayou.

Late in the afternoon a man appeared at Floyd's mill and asked for the foreman. He was directed to Floyd.

"Need any mill hands?" he asked.

"Maybe. Experienced?"

"Yeah."

"Doin' what?"

"Oh, log pond boss, trim saw, carriage man."

"Where'd you work last?"

"Mill upstate—near Greenville log pond."

"Fired?"

"Nope. Mill burned. Other plants wuzn't hirin'."

Floyd nodded. "What's yuh name?"

"Powell; Webb Powell."

"All right, Powell. Git on the pond and keep the big saw fed. Cutting heavy stuff."

VALMA met Webb Powell the following day at noon, when she brought Floyd's dinner. As she passed the log pond Webb, leaping to the shore from a log that he had just pushed onto the drag chain that carried it up to the saw carriage, bumped into the girl, nearly upsetting the lunch basket she carried on her arm. Webb turned with a gruff oath and, seeing the girl, a smile spread over his face.

"Sorry, sister," he said. "Didn't hurt yu?"

"No."

She moved on, feeling that his leering eyes were following her. She saw Floyd appear on the upper story of the mill and waved to him.

Floyd ate his dinner and they walked together for a few minutes about the pond. Webb came from the shack where the mill crew ate and seated himself on a log in the sun. Now and then he cast furtive glances at them

and when they strolled by him he spoke politely.

Every day when Valma came to the mill with her husband's meal, she was aware that the man's eyes were guardedly watching her. It annoyed her somewhat, but she said nothing to Floyd.

Then one day Floyd walked part of the way down the path that led to their house, kissed her, and stood for a moment watching her figure going through the woods. As he came back past the log pond he encountered Powell.

Webb grinned sagaciously.

"Good-lookin' wife yu got, boss."

The foreman ignored him.

Webb was slightly drunk. He winked as Floyd strode past him. "Married happy, huh?" and laughed deep in his throat.

Several times the foreman had to make complaint because the logs were slow in being fed to the saws. Ordinarily Powell and his gang could keep the sawmen jumping to get the logs cut.

But Webb had been working at the mill a week now and the degree of his intoxication increased daily. It came so that he carried a flask of "mule shinney" in his pocket and drank occasionally while he worked.

Unsteady on his feet and with his mind slightly fogged, Webb would foul the logs before he could run them onto the lifting chain. He swore incessantly. If any of the other men attempted to handle the logs he fought them away angrily. He insisted upon directing the logs to the hoist himself. He stormed drunkenly when the logs jammed and slipped away from him and the chain failed to catch them. He floundered about in noisy confusion. The negroes feared him and kept out of his way.

THE CREW on the big saw was howling for logs. The carriage was run-

ning empty. Floyd went down to the pond and approached Webb.

"What's the matter down here?" he demanded.

Powell looked up at the foreman, balancing unevenly on a big log.

"Not a thing that I know of. What seems to be the matter?"

"The saws ain't gittin' enough stuff to cut."

"They ain't? How come?"

"Yu got to keep feedin' them, Powell. We're cuttin' rush stuff and can't lose no time."

"All right. I can't do nuthin' with this gang o' lazy niggers I got workin' on the pond."

"They worked all right before. I thought yu said yu could drive a pond gang."

"I can. I'll make thet saw crew sweat their shirts off."

"Yu been drinkin' too much, Powell."

Webb's bloodshot eyes glared defiantly at the foreman. His lips twisted into a scowl.

"I don't look drunk, do I?"

But Floyd did not answer him. Instead he turned away and called to another man, working on the opposite side of the pond.

"Hey, Kensler. Come over and run these logs in the big saw hoist."

Kensler waved assent and made his way over the floating timber. The foreman spoke to Powell.

"See if you can give Kensler a hand, Powell, and keep them saws goin'."

He walked back into the mill.

Powell glared after him, muttering profanely to himself epithets against the boss. He regarded Kensler with sullen unfriendliness and became more and more ill-tempered and sulky as the morning passed. He indulged in swigs of the shinney frequently and breathed his repeated dislikes of the mill foreman.

At noon Valma brought Floyd's dinner as usual. They sat on a pile

of cut lumber some distance away from the mill while he ate.

While they sat there, Webb Powell came over. He staggered a little and there was a nasty, sour gleam on his face. He stood in front of them, his legs braced wide apart, his eyes squinting.

"What do yu want, Powell?" Floyd demanded.

"I want to know what's the idea o' puttin' thet guy Kensler in my place on the pond?"

His body swayed forward and his lips curled as he spoke.

The foreman's jaw was set grimly; his eyes snapped.

"Git away from here, Powell. Yu know why I put Kensler on thet job."

"Didn't yu hire me——"

"I don't want to talk with you. If yu ain't satisfied with what I told you to do, yu can draw yuh time, and git out!"

Powell stood for a moment looking uncertainly at the foreman. It seemed as if comprehension seeped into his brain slowly or that a dull, sodden thought of reprisal or violence formed vaguely in his mind.

He growled and walked away.

Valma turned to her husband fearfully after he had gone.

"Who's he, Floyd?"

"New hand I took on last week."

"He acts awfully nasty."

"Ain't much good. Don't stay sober. Have to let him go, reckon."

"Don't git into any trouble with him, Floyd," she pleaded anxiously.

He smiled. "Don't worry, Vally. He ain't goin' to give me no trouble."

She smiled back at him, but her heart harbored misgivings and little fears as she saw Powell's ponderous, staggering figure in the distance.

SOME minutes later the whistle blew and the saws began to hum again. Valma arranged her basket

and started back home. Floyd went into the mill.

The girl paused for a few minutes to watch some of the loggers at work. Then she turned into the woods path that ran home.

Webb Powell was coming toward her, a broad grin besmirching his countenance.

"Howdy, sister."

Valma stepped aside from the path. He put out an arresting hand, but she avoided him.

"Want me to carry yu basket home fer yu?"

He took a step forward.

"Kinda swell t' have a pretty wife bringin' dinner t' yu, ain't it? Wouldn't yu like t' bring me dinner every day, too?"

The girl backed away frightened. "Aw, come on, sister. I like yu. Yuh pretty, d'yu know it?"

He reached for her arm, but she had got past him now, and she ran on breathlessly. He started after her, but found difficulty in running. He waved a shaky hand to the retreating girl, and she heard his rough, lewd laughter resounding through the woods as she hurried on.

POWELL returned to work an hour after the whistle had blown. Having consumed the contents of the flask in his pocket he was in a state of blind, malevolent insanity.

Finding Kensler bossing the feed for the big saw intensified his ire. Glowering, he made for Kensler. Picking up a timber hook on the bank of the pond, he started out to where the other man was guiding a stick to the drag chain.

Webb leaped from one log to another with rakish footing. He slipped once and his leg went up to his knee in the water. He swore and went on.

Kensler had a glimpse of Powell coming on the pond but paid no at-

tention to his movement, thinking that he, returning late from lunch, was going to continue his work with the crew.

Kensler's back was to Webb as he pushed a heavy timber through the water. He was unaware of the menacing approach of the other.

Webb came on, leaped from log to log, the timber hook brandished above his head. He might have been using it to balance with. But one of the negroes in the gang discerned the evil suggestion on his face.

Webb was within a few feet of Kensler now, the timber hook caught firmly in his two hands at its handle and raised above him. A cry of warning and Kensler jumped hastily. The hook crashed down within a fraction of his head.

The force of the lunge jerked the hook from Webb's hands, and as he endeavored to catch his balance it slipped into the water. Webb went down to his hands and knees in a perilous position on top of a wobbly log that had every desire to roll.

But Webb regained his feet as Kensler, with a snarl, spun around with his own hook poised as a weapon. A slipping log threw him out of reach of Powell, but he charged after him. Webb made a stumbling retreat for the shore.

The attempted assault had attracted the attention of everyone within sight and the mill hands were running to the scene to witness the scrap. Men appeared from the mill shed, gathering on the bank of the log pond.

Webb reached the ground and faced his opponent like an infuriated beast.

"Your fists, Kensler," someone shouted.

Kensler nodded and dropped the timber hook. Then, head down, he tore into Powell. They came together like bulls, clinched, and tus-

sled. Fists were jabbing madly and wildly. Boots were brought into play against shins. The crowd hooted and the combatants wrestled.

THEN the foreman came upon the scene. He pushed his way gruffly through the onlookers and grabbed the two men by their shoulders.

They whirled from his grasp and flying fists held his off an instant. But he stepped in again and motioned to another of the hands to pull Kensler away.

"Let 'em fight, boss."

"Fight nothing," Floyd cried under his breath. "I'll take care of this fellow."

An eager, anticipant murmur ran through the crowd. The two fighters were separated. Two companions held the panting Kensler in check. Floyd stepped in front of Powell.

"Enough of this, Powell," he said sharply.

Webb brushed against him with his fist. At first he did not recognize the foremen. When he did he paused, looked up at Floyd with his red, hate-filled eyes. His lips trembled with virulent emotion. His fist struck through the air and collided against the other's arm, thrown up in defense.

"Yu can git out o' here," the foreman said. "If there's any time due yu, yu've got ten minutes to collect it and git."

Webb glared at him.

"Is that so? Yu think yu're firin' me?"

He laughed with sinister contempt.

"Yeah, I'm firin' yu. An' if I catch yu in these parts any later than sundown tonight, I'll——"

"Yu firin' me?"

"Thet's what I said. Now git along. I don't want yu around the mill."

"What yu firin' me fer?"

"Git."

Webb lurched forward, his coarse fingers seeking a hold on the foreman's collar. His face was pushed close to the other's, his eyes were threatening.

"Why, you—I'll kill you, yu houn'——"

There was a dull thud as Floyd's fist brought up with a sharp impact against Powell's chin.

Webb staggered back and a second vicious blow landed against his jaw, hurling him down. He had been near the edge of the water; as he went down he fell over a log and splashed into the pond. The logs parted under his weight and he sank.

A roar of rough laughter went up from the men and they fished him out. When Webb regained his feet, the foreman was walking back to the mill. The words that Powell said were unintelligible to those who were returning to their work.

Webb Powell collected his pay and sauntered away from the mill some minutes later. He was in a morose, sullen mood, his temper smarting under the recent events and a new supply of liquor. He trudged along, brooding and comforting himself with his hatred and the flask.

Presently he could see through the trees the foreman's house up on the side of the hill. For a long time Webb Powell stood there in the path contemplating the house with his bleary eyes and considering other things with his befogged brain.

LATE in the afternoon the deputy sheriff from down at the settlement on Bayou Duce came up to the mill. He had with him another man who, when he had been introduced to Floyd, showed a badge on his vest.

"I'm a deputy from Coffee County," he said. "I've got a warrant here for a man—we've traced him here. At least, the storekeeper down

at the settlement says he's seen a man answerin' that description and he thinks he's working in this mill."

"What's his name?"

"Webb Powell."

Floyd's eyes widened and he glanced sharply at the two officers.

"Why——"

"Seen him?"

"He's been workin' here," the foreman answered. "But he made all kinds of trouble—drunk and fightin' my men; I just fired him less'n three hours ago."

"He would make trouble all right. We're after him on two charges now—killed a man at a mill up in my county while in a drunken fight; and he deserted his wife and baby, after pushing the kid into the fireplace and burning it horribly."

"Don't know where he went, do you? We've got positive identification if we can find him."

"No. I reckoned he was goin' down to the settlement. Drew his time 'bout two-thirty. I ain't seen him since then," Floyd said.

THE MILL was working overtime and the knocking-off whistle did not blow until eight o'clock. It was late fall and consequently quite dark at that hour when Floyd started up the path toward his home.

He walked along thoughtfully. He was tired for once and he was worried about the lumber the mill was getting out.

The incident with the drunken log pond hand had upset him somewhat. It made the foreman irritable to have to be annoyed with anything like that when he was so busy with the mill.

He thought of Valma. He'd be glad to get home to her. She was wonderfully competent; she had a way of soothing him when he was tired and upset.

Floyd was tremendously fond of his wife. He realized that he was lucky

to have her, more fortunate than most men whose livelihood is gained in the piney woods. The little touches Valma gave to the house were restful and friendly. Valma had youth yet, and a lot of beauty.

Pretty girls are rare in the backwoods. Girls can't stay pretty long. The same way the finer emotions of men can't live. It's hard life in the piney woods, hard and brutal. A man fights for almost everything he wants. He fights or he doesn't get anywhere.

Floyd felt his large, hard hands moodily. Sawmills are rough places at best. Nourished in men a meanness, a vileness, something terribly crude. Brutal nature dominated. Men like Webb Powell were not typical of the environment.

The night was still again, as it had been that Sunday he and Valma went to hear the preacher over at the village on the bayou. Funny chap, that preacher. Didn't seem to make anything clear, but had some interesting ideas. Valma liked to go hear him. It was something different for her.

He found very little amusement back here in the piney woods, living in the atmosphere of a saw mill. Valma was pretty, too, and sort of gay. Going down to hear the preacher was excitement for her.

Floyd didn't like to leave Valma all alone in the house in the woods. Too lonely for her, especially when he had to work so late. Might be better when he built closer to the mill. But even there the atmosphere wasn't the best for a woman.

Floyd thought of taking her away, for a while, anyway. She'd like a trip to Mobile, seeing things. Ought to think that over. Valma was a good wife. He ought to appreciate her, make her happy. She wasn't complaining, of course.

The woods were gloomy in their stillness. The moon was rising late now and hadn't yet come into the

sky. Some of the shadows were an impenetrable blackness, with the tiny flash of lightning-bugs now and then. The woods were sweet with age.

Floyd felt the serenity of the surroundings. At night the harshness of the woods is wiped away. All that is reality in the glare of the sun is somehow remote when night has masked the pines.

FLOYD stopped abruptly, startled. An ominous form, darker than the shadows, appeared from behind a tree trunk and stood before him. He heard a low, guttural laugh. Three tongues of blue flame danced in the blackness and the woods echoed the loud barking of the gun.

"I said I'd kill you——"

A hot bolt pierced Floyd's shoulder.

WEBB POWELL saw the dim figure that he had fired at crumple to the ground. The sound of the explosions resounded through the intense silence of the woods like the recurring vibrations of a drum.

Webb hesitated for a moment, then grunted with deep satisfaction. He threw the weapon at the fallen man and accompanied it with an oath. He spat and turned and started on along the woods path.

Webb felt a bubbling of pleasure within him. He was highly delighted with himself; he drank the remainder of the flask of shinney, cast the bottle into the darkness, and drew his hand across his lips with appreciation. He sucked his lips with relish and broke into a dog-trot.

He could not see the house yet. The pines grew pretty heavy here. The pine-straw under his feet rustled as he ran through it.

His pace quickened. Webb was laughing gloatingly. His blood was afire.

Suddenly he tripped, fell over a

rotten stump and went sprawling headlong to the ground. The earth was damp and mouldy; he brushed the decayed vegetation from his clothes angrily.

Webb cursed efficiently as he got up, and gave the offending stump a vicious kick. It crumpled with the blow.

Webb started on again. His leg had been bruised by contact with the stump and he limped slightly. He had moved along the path for some distance now, at a brisk walk, growling to himself. He turned and glanced back—and a frightened cry burst from his lips.

He stopped abruptly and stood there staring at the ground. He seemed a bit dazed, as if something dumbfounding had appeared before his drunken vision. Webb blinked and rubbed his knuckles into his eyes. It was still there.

Here and there in the path stretching back of him were little splotches of bright light—glowing spots on a dark woods floor. They had the appearance of the embers from a fire, lifeless, dully glowing, grayish, scattered along the ground.

Powell looked at his feet and saw that the sole of one shoe was covered with foxfire. He scraped his foot on the ground; the light became brighter and for a time a wavering glow spread over the area where he had rubbed his foot.

Foxfire—from dead things. . . .

It is said in the swamp country that you can never get rid of foxfire once you get into it; once you have set it going and it is on your feet, all the phosphorescence in the ground will be attracted. Just as when a fire has been disturbed and the sparks fly, this fox-fire seems to scatter and to start other bits of it glowing elsewhere. Every dead pile of leaves will respond --and you kick up foxfire, afresh it seems, with every step you take.

Webb muttered thickly, and his

ponderous body swayed slightly with the effects of the liquor. He shifted nervously as an insane fear began to take hold of him.

DOWN that trail of foxfire something was approaching. Webb Powell stood as though paralyzed, transfixed, watching it. He was only dimly aware of its being there at first, but his mind quickly distinguished it, brought it to his recognition.

He stared and made out the form of a child toddling along; it stumbled and fell headlong, looking as if it had fallen into the foxfire. Its body seemed to glow a little, too; when it got up a lambent light, hazy, formless, suggested arms and head and an upper part of the torso touched with the effulgence of the foxfire, burning in its dead flame.

Even though the fox-fire was growing dim, it was there, tell-tale, following him. And that apparition—that baby!

The foxfire was dead; it didn't burn, it only glowed; but that baby—it must be dead, too, to be burning in that foxfire. Falling headlong into the fire.

The man's demented, shinney-sogged brain brought a suddenly vivid picture of that baby going headlong into a flaming mass of pine-knots into which he had hurled it.

A woman's voice. Calling to the baby. The ghostly little figure stopped and seemed to be listening. The voice was familiar. But in the shadows. It was after him, as the child was following him.

Webb was frantic. He started on again and the noise of his movement startled that babyish form. It whimpered.

Now real fear possessed Webb Powell—wild, hectic, drunken, unreasoning fear. He ran on and sobbed; he lunged ahead hysterically, twisting and turning to get away

from that foxfire and the trailing wraith.

Webb was literally insane. All sense of direction was lost to him. He only ran, in a blind terror. The shadowed woods were a great trap, a net in which he had been caught. Trees were hemming him in, blocking his escape from that ghostly thing; while the fire—fire that was cold, sinister, *dead—dead fire!*—

Webb ran on and on and on. . . .

FLOYD heard Webb Powell hurrying through the woods, away from him. The pain in his shoulder was excruciating, maddening torture. He was weak. He felt that his body was numb and unresponsive to his nerves.

A thought came to him. Valma! Alone in the house. Powell going—Oh, good God!

Floyd attempted to rise to his feet and the darkness whirled like a hideous maelstrom about him. He fell back to the ground and was for a few minutes in a state of partial coma. Then he was aware that some one was with him—some one who, it seemed, had come upon him suddenly, some one who was frightened.

The cry was that of a woman. She was bending over him, her hands under his shoulders and her face close to his as she peered at him in an effort to distinguish his features in the heavy gloom.

She spoke to some one; a child, it seemed. Now she was trying to lift him to his feet. The child must have wandered away, for she called louder. Presently she was scolding the child for having gotten into some foxfire and smearing it on its face and hands.

Valma, coming down the path at the head of the gully, met them—her husband walking weakly, half-carried by the woman on whose shoulder he sagged.

A small child, hardly able to walk

fast enough to keep up with them, tugged at the woman's skirt.

Consternation was in Valma's face, her bright eyes were wide. She had heard the shots and was afraid. All afternoon she had thought of Webb Powell.

Her strong arms were about Floyd now, and the two women got him to the house.

Valma! So capable in that room she had given a few neat touches to make brighter. Tender, dressing his wound.

He remembered the woman who had found him. She was still there. He wanted to know her name, and she told him. And then he saw her arms in the lamplight; they were scarred up to the elbows.

The child was still clinging to her skirt. Floyd shuddered as he saw it. Its head and upper body and arms had been badly burned.

"That deputy brought me here to identify Webb when they arrest him," the woman was saying in answer to his questions.

"I saw Webb come into the settlement down on the bayou this evenin' just before dark, and I followed him when he started back. I was going to kill him," she said.

IN THE morning one of the mill hands who happened to be passing that way found Webb Powell's body at the bottom of the gully. His neck had been neatly broken by his fall.

Spectre Dogs

There are numerous stories of spectre dogs, usually supposed—in days not so remote—to have been the appearance assumed by fiends, or by evil mortals, who as part of their punishment had been given this shape.

They were as a rule large, black and shaggy, larger than a *Newfoundland*.

One of the most noted of these infernal hounds was the 'Mauthe Dog', which haunted the guard room and corridors of Peel Castle in the Isle of Man, and terrified more than one soldier to his death.

Another haunted the gibbet in the parish of Tring, in Hertfordshire, on which was hanged a chimney sweep who, having been the chief agent in the drowning of an old woman accused of witchcraft, himself came to an evil end. Many witnesses attested to having seen the hound.

The Brother of Sleep



By
EARLE
DANESFORD

*"How wonderful is Death,
Death and his brother, Sleep. . ."*
—Shelley.

THE MAN in the arm-chair sat very still. The firelight sent little corruscating gleams over his drawn face—gleams that trickled down till they touched, in a dancing ribbon of light, his thin, veined hand, the fingers closed tentatively over the butt of a revolver.

The room was full of shadows save for a single shaft of white sent through the half-open french windows by the moon. Somewhere near by a clock chimed softly nine times, then settled down again into a regular *tick-tock, tick-tock*—a mere whisper of sound, like a stitch in the garment of silence.

Did it really require courage—to take one's own life?

His eyes were fixed upon the blue

muzzle of the revolver in a fascinated stare. He raised the thing till it pressed lightly against his temple, sending a little cold shiver through his body. But the shiver passed: already the warm, living flesh had killed it.

After all, what was there to be afraid of? Death itself was a swift and painless thing, this way. The agony, the fear, was all in the moment before—the Prelude to Nothingness.

Nothingness. . . . !

YES, he had quite made up his mind about that. Life was self-contained, strictly limited to this side of Eternity. As to the "Other Side"—well, there was none. Death was the Great

Full Stop. The real and unalterable end. The only reality in a swamp of illusion! Blackness! Obliteration!

He had only to tighten his hold upon the trigger—such a little effort for so great a reward. The reward of eternal silence, of escape into utter finality.

His fingers groped for a firmer hold. He closed his eyes. . . .

Of course they would call it suicide while of unsound mind. Even now, on the brink of the impalpable, his set lips relaxed into a slight smile. If half the people in the world were as sane as he was tonight, it might have been a better place to live in. There might have been no need for him to have written to the coroner that letter, which stood now upon the mantelpiece in front of the clock.

And it was not as if he had really grown tired of life. Tired—at forty-three! Just the time when a man might sit back and take a steady look at things. Not even midway between dawn and eventide.

Why, he could still feel that odd thrill which had come upon him ten—or was it fifteen?—years ago, when he had stood, as it were, on the rim of the world, basking in the warm sunshine of potential success, conscious of the pride that comes of certain progress, the Onward March.

HIS ARM relaxed and fell back.

He—he'd wait a bit—think it over. Maybe he'd give life just one more chance—let fate have another run for its money. There were—there must be—compensations, somewhere. If he could only find them.

It was early yet. Withers, the butler, wouldn't be in with the usual nightcap for another hour at least. Meantime, he'd just lie back and rest.

Old Brownson, the sawbones, had been on to him about resting. "Your nerves, old man—they're worn out."

Perhaps, after all, it was his nerves. . . .

The waters of sleep received him and he sank into their depths gratefully. He was unspeakably tired.

But presently those same waters, by some odd trick, lost their calm, because violently disturbed. The blackness of sleep became tinged with gray, with the pallid dawn of nightmare.

Abruptly he found himself whirling helplessly along in the grip of a torrent against which he was too weary to struggle. The waters swept over his head, bearing him relentlessly onward till at last he was poised, for a frightful instant, on the brink of a bottomless pit.

And then, even as he felt himself falling there came a sudden, blinding flash of white light and everything went out.

THE NEXT thing he knew was that he was sitting up in his arm-chair, staring dazedly down at the figure of a small white terrier which, an instant before, had been pawing at his arm.

"Hullo, Gyp! What do you want? You woke me up, you bounder."

He reached out to stroke the animal and then stopped in surprise. The dog had suddenly winced and was now cowering, its tail between its legs, its eyes—abnormally large and round—fixed upon its master's face.

"What's the matter, Gyp? Come here—come along, old man—"

But the animal only cowered the more, and now began to whine mournfully.

He rose from his chair and, as he did so, the door of the room opened and Withers, the butler, entered, bearing a tray. The man's back was toward the fireplace, and he moved woodenly across the room to a small table.

"I say, Withers! What's happened to this dog? It——"

He broke off with an indignant gasp. Withers, having set down the tray and coughed discreetly, was marching stolidly back the way he had come, taking not the slightest notice of his master's voice.

"Withers! Do you hear me? Why, confound your impudence!"

He turned and darted across in the wake of the manservant, who had now reached the door and passed through it, closing it behind him even as his master reached it.

FOR a moment he remained where he was, staring at the closed door, more bewildered than angry. And then a sudden, heart-rending howl caused him to face round.

The dog had not moved from its position by the arm-chair. It was cowering beside it now, even more abjectly than before. Its whole body was quivering.

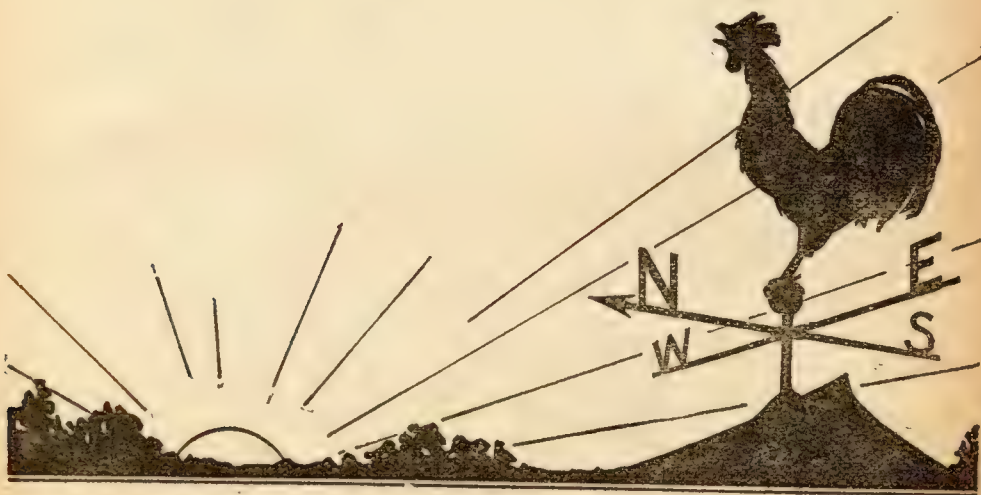
He moved nearer, calling to the animal. But, like Withers, it paid no attention. Its eyes were fixed upon the chair itself, in a stare of mingled misery and terror.

And now, following the dog's gaze, he became aware of something he had not noticed before. The chair was not unoccupied. It held the huddled body of a man, whose sightless eyes were staring into vacancy, the grin of death in their glazed depths.

AT THE inquest it was stated that death had been caused by a revolver bullet, fired upward through the chest into the heart.

Withers, the butler, cross-examined by the deceased's solicitor, admitted that his late master had been inordinately fond of his dog, Gyp, and that the latter had a trick, whenever his master reclined in his arm-chair, of rising on his hind legs and pawing at him. . . .

The coroner returned a verdict of suicide whilst of Unsound Mind.



Cards and Spades



By
GILBERT
RIDDELL

THE cemetery was one of those burying-grounds that New York, with unexpected respect for the long-forgotten dead, has left intact even in the business sections of the city. But this graveyard was situated in a lonely district of the upper hundreds, near the Hudson river.

It was planted with many weeping willow trees whose long, dark streamers swayed mournfully and unceasingly, sweeping slowly across the crumbling tombstones. Occasionally the streamers parted sufficiently to show the moulding mortuary chapel in the middle of the plot.

From the river the wailing sirens of passing steamboats found ghostly echoes in this particular Acre of the Deity. Although no one had been buried there for many years, tonight

there was an open grave just beyond the wooden fence.

AS Jack Gordon turned the corner from the Drive he started at the sight of it, then shook his shoulders, annoyed and somewhat dismayed. That a man of his splendid physique and comparative youth should shudder at an open grave was ridiculous.

"Must be lingering war nerves," he muttered savagely, and was further startled at realizing that he had spoken aloud.

Or, perhaps, Stasia's summons had made him sensitive to sinister impressions. Alone, at midnight, and in trouble—and in Frank Ames' studio! Her voice had had sobs in it—that dear voice, that he had heard now for the first time since her marriage to Fred Butterworth.

THE cemetery and its neighborhood had found favor with certain artists—hence the Monastery, the studio building where Ames lived and worked, where he had gradually grown to fame and fortune. It was nearer the corner of the next avenue, and opposite the cemetery.

But Jack Gordon continued on past the cemetery, instead of crossing the street, to prove to himself that he was not that sort of coward. The little wooden gate was open, he noticed. This must be the work of some careless grave digger, for he knew that the old caretaker was very particular about keeping it locked, although its rusty hardware would offer little resistance to the feeblest, and the low fence was hardly calculated to keep anyone out.

A shadow moving suddenly among the drooping willows near the open grave sent another shiver down Gordon's magnificent spine. Quite furious now at his unexpected impressionableness, but unable to shake off the feeling of horror that had leaped at him with the sight of the open grave, Gordon frankly gave it up and hurried across the street.

Doubtless, he told himself, it was the fear that he would be too late to save Stasia Butterworth from whatever it was that threatened her that made him nervous tonight. For when would not danger to her have thrown him into a panic!

And now, to hear her voice, subdued but terror-stricken, begging him to hurry to her—alone—at midnight—in Frank Ames' studio!

She had not explained and he had not asked how this had come about; her call for help had been too urgent, too convincing. He had merely replied that he would be with her immediately, and then had started on the run from his bachelor quarters, only three blocks away.

Stasia's voice had come to him so

suddenly, reading late in his easy-chair—that voice that had been, that was, so dear to him! The first time he had heard it since her marriage to Fred Butterworth, since that evil hour when she had confessed that she preferred him, but had married Butterworth out of pique.

Fred had been his pal at college—one of them; yet he had intercepted his letters and stolen the girl he loved. Stasia herself had told him of the intercepted letters. It had seemed incredible then; it seemed so still.

It was then, when she had told him, immediately after her marriage, that he had threatened to kill Fred Butterworth—a threat that neither he nor the half dozen friends who had heard it would ever forget. A threat that he might have carried into execution, if it had not been for Frank Ames.

And now she had telephoned him from Ames' studio—Ames, whom she hardly knew, so Gordon thought. She was alone, apparently in danger, and had sent for him.

Accompanying the apprehension that her summons had aroused was a deep satisfaction that, even after years, the woman he loved should have turned to him for help. For Jack Gordon was that *rara avis* of modern times, a man of honor. Once Stasia had become the wife of another he had carefully avoided her, for he could not cease to love her.

THE ARCHITECT of the Monastery had chosen for his model a crumbling old abbey near Avignon in France; the outer walls were of dark gray stone, the interior was painted in the same dun color; the electric bulbs were shaded by dark lanterns in black frames.

The dark oak door was ajar and as Gordon pushed it a little wider he almost expected to see the lights flare

in the late autumn breeze that followed him, so realistic was the suggestion of a gaunt Old World hall lit by flickering torches.

The stairs mounted upward, steep ladders of gray stone, and the doors of the studios glowered at him from the landings like the portals of old, secret cells.

Until tonight Jack Gordon had rather admired this building, and the thorough way the architect had followed his model. But now he wondered why the architect could not have chosen a livelier scheme.

So tense and grim was the silence as he continued to mount upward to the top floor that when that long steamboat wail rose again from the river penetrating even into the dark gray building, Gordon's foot faltered again, as it had done at the curb, and he nearly missed one of those steep, ladderlike steps.

"Another blunder like that, my man," he scolded himself, "and you'll break your neck."

And again he started and swore, finding that, like some nervous weakling, he had spoken his thoughts aloud.

Ames' studio was the only one on the top floor, for the building narrowed as it ascended, and he was one of the few tenants who used his studio for living purposes as well as a workshop.

It was, therefore, all the more extraordinary that Stasia should have said she was alone there. Where, then, was Ames?

At the head of the last flight of steps a brighter gleam behind her threw into charming relief the outlines of a very lovely woman. Her little hands, whiter than seemed necessary, were fumbling at the wall as if seeking support; but as Gordon's head rose above the last step she threw herself forward into his

arms, whispering, sobbing, like some neurotic subject.

GORDON had been holding the slender iron railing which served as banister to the stairs, for he had found it heavy going up those ladderlike structures. A most unusual thing with him, for he usually bounded lightly to the top without a pause or the least clutch at a banister.

But tonight, as he had observed, everything was different. He had clutched at the banister as he mounted, and it was fortunate that he had; for the impact of the woman would surely have thrown him backward down the stairs otherwise.

As it was, he staggered and found it difficult to gain the landing with his burden. Once there he almost threw her from him and stood staring at her, as she faced him, swaying as if she would fall, and fumbling with her hands again, this time at the bosom of her gown.

She kept muttering his name over and over again—"Jack, Jack"—and with feeble motions indicated the open door through which streamed the brighter light.

"Jack," she repeated; her brain seemed to fumble as well as her fingers—unintelligible murmurs came from her pretty lips.

Staring across the hall at her, Jack Gordon wondered at himself. Everything seemed to have gone wrong with him tonight; the very fibre of his being seemed to have changed.

That woman opposite him was the only woman he had ever loved, and yet he had thrown her from him when she had fallen helpless and clinging to his embrace, and now he stood there staring at her in an almost hostile way. Still, it had been her call for help over the telephone that had brought him at midnight from his cozy bachelor quarters.

Stasia Butterworth, if she noticed

anything strange about this man in whose adoration she had believed for years, gave no sign. Her white face seemed drained of all emotion save fear—her large blue eyes only stared miserably at Gordon.

Her short red hair was disheveled and her dress was torn. But it was only after he had stared at her in that unaccountable way for several seconds that Jack Gordon became aware of the fact. Until then his dark eyes had seemed incapable of doing anything save stare at Stasia; now they began to rove over her pretty gown of pink surah; in one place it was darker than in the rest of it—and that darkness was of the color of blood.

The personification of careful grooming was Stasia; yet there she stood with tumbled hair, a torn sleeve and a sinister stain on the hem of her dress—wringing her hands, incapable of speech, in a gloomy, lonely house, at midnight.

And still Gordon failed to do the natural thing, the thing he would have supposed that any man would do. He did not reach out and take the poor, fluttering thing in his arms; instead he turned suddenly aside and strode the few steps down the hall that would carry him to Frank Ames' door.

Through the open door, even before he entered, he saw the wild disorder.

AMES' studio had been beautiful with oriental rugs, with his own lovely paintings, deep chairs and that one luxurious divan that he used sometimes as a model throne, sometimes as a bed.

There was a torn rug in a tumbled heap near the door, a broken chair further in, a smashed Ming vase upon the hearth; the old French silk curtains were torn from their poles—the very lamps had been smashed, so that all Ames' artistic lighting

effects were gone, and the electricity blared full blast upon the scene.

The woman had followed him, still muttering and murmuring. She was at his side, clinging to his arm, looking up into his face with that sweet appeal that had never failed to move Jack Gordon.

At last he put his hand out and clasped hers.

"Where is Frank?" he demanded.

There was no answer, save that unintelligible flow of feeble sound.

Roughly, Gordon took the girl by the shoulders and shook her.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Her muttering died away; she fell into absolute speechlessness for a second. Then she seemed to find her voice, a low, unnatural one.

"Forgive me, forgive me," she said frantically.

"Forgive you?" queried Gordon. "I don't understand. What is the matter, Stasia? What has happened? Why are you here?"

She passed a hand across her forehead, as if to call back memory. "I came to stay with him—I've been doing that."

For a moment Jack Gordon stood motionless. Then he gripped her arm and stared into her eyes.

"My God!"

As he heard the exclamation he realized that he had spoken—it must have been he, there was no other man in the room—and yet he knew he was not the sort of man to act like this. He loosed her arm abruptly.

"You—you loved Ames?" he stammered.

Stasia shook her head. "Not the way I loved you," she whispered. "Not the same. But you—you wouldn't believe me. You thought because I married Fred—I loved him. Or that I ought not to try for any relief from the sordid thing my

marriage to him was. Frank Ames was different."

Jack Gordon's hand fell from the woman's arm. The paralyzed feeling continued, as if everything but his brain, his memory, had been quieted, that he might think, think.

For years he had loved Stasia, but he had kept away from her, although she had speedily let him see that she believed her marriage with Butterworth was a mistake.

After that one wild outburst, after she had told him that Butterworth had intercepted his letters, so that she believed he had forsaken her, and in a spirit of pique married Fred, he had never attempted to see her. For she was the wife of another man, whether she loved him or not, and, in spite of the fact that Butterworth had got her through foul means, Jack Gordon was old-fashioned enough to frown upon the least suggestion that he, in turn, should take Butterworth's wife away from him.

He loved her, unalterably, he worshiped her from afar; but he let no sign of his devotion reach her. For that would be treason, and Jack Gordon was an honorable man.

No other woman had ever been able to make him forget her, and he had led a lonely life, pretending to be content with his books and a few congenial friends; stifling his longing for a wife and kiddies.

And all for this woman in front of him who calmly admitted that she had come there to spend the night "as usual" with his friend, Frank Ames!

GORDON clenched his fist; the feeling of paralysis was passing; he found that he could speak.

"Then you married Butterworth for his money—I remember that he had more than than Frank, than I. And my letters—you told me he had intercepted them; was it true?"

Stasia stared; what had she said? What was the matter with her tonight? The awful thing that had just happened—that was it, that had unmasked her, unnerved her, to the point of speaking the truth. She must recover her lost ground.

She seized his hand and clung to it. "Don't, don't," she begged; "not now—pity me—something awful has happened."

"And you sent for me to save you from the consequences."

She could not deny this.

"I sent for you to save me from Fred."

"Where is he?" demanded Gordon, looking about.

Ames' studio consisted of a single large room with a north skylight and two windows. On one side two small rooms were arranged as kitchen and bathroom. The doors of these stood wide open, and were brilliantly lit. A glance sufficed to show Gordon that he was alone with Stasia.

"Where is Butterworth?" demanded Gordon and as she continued miserably to shake her head, he went on.

"What happened? If you want me to help you, and I suppose I must, tell me everything."

"I am trying to," she acquiesced eagerly, "only it is so awful. I never dreamed that Fred knew—would find out. But he did. He came tonight—he found us—together. He had a knife. Oh, I can't stand—I shall fall—I shall die!"

She sank suddenly on the wide divan that Ames used as a bed at night and Gordon bent over her.

"Butterworth had a knife!" he prompted her. "He attacked Frank?"

"Of course, of course," she wailed.

Suddenly she sat up. "Listen! He's coming back!"

"Coming back?" cried Gordon. "What do you mean? After an attack on Fred's part, after such a

struggle as they must have had, they went out together?" It seemed incredible.

"Together?" echoed Stasia. She sat there staring at Gordon.

"Oh!" she cried, in a kind of horror, and sank down on the divan again, digging her face into the pillows.

Gordon could hear the coming footsteps now himself; there was nothing to be got from Stasia at the moment. One of them was coming back, she had said.

Whatever had happened, he had no cause to fear either of them. Both men had been his pals at college; the three had been inseparable. Only a woman had come between them.

Again Gordon shuddered as he stepped out into the hall. Shuddered, recalling that once he had hated Fred Butterworth enough to kill him—had told him so—and that had been the end. They had never met since that wild night.

But now they were to meet again, for Gordon saw as the man's head rose above the stairs that it was Butterworth—Butterworth, in torn clothing, gripping the banister hard, as if he feared to fall, fairly hauling himself up by it.

His face, Jack thought, was like that of a corpse. He had lost his hat; his lips were moving—moisture was oozing from them. Some terrible, horrible thing had happened to him, shaking him to the core. Something deep and hidden, Gordon speculated, from which he would never recover.

And whatever it was, it was the fault of that woman back there on the divan, sobbing out—

No, she wasn't there. She had come out into the hall. She was at Jack's shoulder, standing behind him, shielded by his body, yet watching the return of her husband with terror-stricken eyes.

"Save me, save me," she whispered frantically into Gordon's ear.

But Gordon moved away from her toward the man hauling himself up those steep, ladderlike stairs. Something in the frightened, white face of Fred Butterworth brought back their campus days.

Butterworth needed help, human sympathy, as much as the frail woman at his elbow. Gordon strode forward, crying out:

"Fred!"

THERE was a great gasping sound. The man on the stairs threw his head up. His eyes stared into Gordon's. And even as the latter sprang toward him Butterworth's grip on the banister loosened and he fell backward, down the stairs. A nauseating thud completely demoralized Gordon.

For minutes he stood there, afraid to go down those stairs; hoping, yet dreading, to hear a moan.

That low, soft voice that he had loved, was whispering at his elbow:

"We must do something—something!"

Yes, of course, they must do something—something. He, at any rate. He was a great, strong man, renowned for his courage as well as his chivalry. But he stood fixed to the spot, unable to speak, to think.

Yet he found that his numb feet were carrying him forward, that he was actually going down, one step after the other, step by step, very, very slowly, toward that which lay quietly at the foot of those stairs.

There was a great silence in the gaunt house; if any of the tenants were at home, and they had heard anything, they were steadfastly minding their own business, as is the way with artists.

A great silence, in which Gordon's feet fell with a tremendous resonance, or so it seemed to him.

A great silence, during which a lone clock somewhere struck one, slowly, and then was still, with a horrible, sickening stillness.

HIS numb feet were on the landing. He was actually bending over the dead man, actually examining him, making assurance doubly sure that the man's neck was broken. At his side was Stasia, whispering again, gibbering again.

"Do something," was the burden of her mutterings.

Yes, of course, he must do something. There was blood on her dress. There was blood on Butterworth.

There was no time to examine his wounds; some specialist later might say he had died of one and had merely been thrown down the stairs. Of course they would say that Stasia had done it. Dear, sweet, beautiful little Stasia! She would go to jail. She would go to the chair——

Suddenly he found that he was holding Stasia by the arm, staring at her.

This was the woman he had loved, had sacrificed his life for. In turn she had sacrificed him. She hadn't even been true to him, whom she claimed to love.

But that didn't matter. He must put such thoughts out of his mind. Nothing mattered now but tonight's dreadful business. Nothing mattered but to save Stasia from death or scandal.

"Do something; must do something; neighbors—soon——" Stasia was whispering.

Not "Poor Fred, my poor husband!" Gordon noticed that. No pity for his passing—nothing, only fear.

Well, he was afraid, too. He didn't want to be taken for poor Fred's murderer. And, after all—alone here, at one o'clock in the morning, alone with Fred's wife—Fred, that huddled, awfully quiet mass!

And as for Ames—where was he? The question occurred to him, but he did not ask it. Besides, it didn't matter where he was. Not just now. Other things to think of.

Like a chorus at his side, Stasia was imploring "Do something. Someone will come. They will think——"

Yes, of course, they would think that she had done it. And he couldn't let that be. He loved her—the mere touch of her flesh now, as she pressed her bare arm against him—even in this awful situation. He shook himself and glared at the woman who could so obsess him, at a time like this!

Do something! Of course, for her sake, for Ames' sake—Ames, the poor old dub whom he loved, too, who was merely a victim of this woman's wiles! "This woman!" He could call Stasia Barnes *that*!

"Do something; hide him somewhere; hide him," the sweet low voice was urging, lovelier in its husky pleading.

Hide him somewhere, of course. Save his friend, the woman he loved! Perhaps himself! Oh, certainly, himself. That was it—that threat——

Like lightning his mind communicated its thoughts to hers.

"Someone might remember," she whispered, "someone would remember that you threatened to kill him—and never saw him again—until tonight. And now he is dead. Don't you see? It's for your sake."

Gordon stared at her; for his sake? He had never been a coward. He drew back.

"All right," he said, "then I'll telephone the police."

But Stasia's hands were tightened round his arm.

"No, no, no," she begged. "Think of the disgrace. Think of what will happen to me. No, no, no—hide him. There's no harm. We didn't kill him."

Why should either of us suffer when we are so innocent."

Sensible. Always sensible. Stasia had a reputation for that. She had proven it, too. She had married a rich man, instead of either of two poorer admirers, although she had evidently preferred both.

Both! A wild laugh rang involuntarily from Gordon's lips. Terror-stricken, Stasia clapped her hand over his mouth.

"Hurry," she whispered, "think; do something! We shall go mad standing here."

GORDON tore her hand from his mouth; but he did not laugh again. He was very quiet now, for he knew what he had to do. He had to hide the body of a dead man, a man he had not killed, just as if he were a murderer—to save himself, or a friend, or the woman he loved—a woman who had loved three men.

His splendid frame shook again. This was a reminiscent shudder, for he knew why he had shivered when he had passed that open grave. It had meant something to him—it was going to mean something to him.

He spoke for the first time. "You will have to help me," he said, grimly, stooping over.

"Yes," she whispered thankfully, stooping, too.

SHE could help. She could carry him—hurry, and beg Gordon to hurry.

She could hustle away with the corpse of the man she had lain beside, night after night! Whom she had sworn to love and cherish.

She could keep his two feet with their long shoes off the ground; she, that frail, lovely thing! Gordon's eyes stared across his burden at her.

The night was still and black. The old willow trees in the cemetery seemed to stand in an inseparable

formation. No light shone between them; but the open grave yawned distinctly in the light of the street lamps.

Even the gate was still conveniently open, as though it had been arranged to aid them. Oddly enough, Stasia made no comment on their destination, but followed blindly where Gordon led.

In that she showed her sense, as usual. Always a sensible little thing—marrying a man for his money, and now hiding his body to avoid punishment; the kind of punishment, at least, that the world accords an unfaithful wife.

And yet she looked so frail, so sweet. The very touch of her could send a man's senses reeling. Could send his—the thought of her, even.

"In here?" she was whispering. There was horror in her tone. They were carrying the body through the open gate, past the first group of willows, past the old marble slabs, to the new grave.

"In here," said Gordon grimly. He motioned her to put the feet down. With a sigh of relief he laid the shoulders down, on the ground beside the grave, away from the street, so that not even a chance passerby would see.

"Keep out of sight," he whispered. "Keep in the shadows."

He saw her slink away, behind the willows, so that even he found it hard to distinguish her pale pink dress.

"Don't go far," he called softly, "I shall need you yet."

"I'm here," came a faint whisper. She had managed to obscure herself without getting out of hearing.

HE SET about his ghastly task, shaking again with that formidable shudder that had attacked him when he first had seen the open grave.

The dirt that had been thrown up by the grave diggers amounted to veritable mounds, high enough for

anyone to hide behind. Yet, Gordon thought it wiser to dig up the earth in the middle of the bottom of the grave, put the corpse in, and close that over.

Grave diggers, for all he knew, might be as observing as the rest of mankind. They might notice if those high mounds were disturbed.

Such a deep grave, he reckoned, hid no other occupants—had been opened for the first time. It's nearness to the fence would also indicate that. He jumped in.

Even as he landed, he knew what it was his feet had struck; recognized, although he encountered such a thing for the first time, the soft impact of a human body.

HE HAD forgotten about getting out when he had jumped into the open grave. Now he found his fingers clutching at the sides of the grave to no purpose. He was pulling the earth on top of himself; his feet were almost buried when he came to his senses.

He came to, with a furious exclamation of disgust. He had thought himself a strong man and here he was, floored by the first uncanny experience of his life.

What if he had struck a human body in the grave? That was natural. Someone had been buried there before.

Buried there before? Without a coffin?

Again he shivered; that was absurd, of course. Whatever body was there had no right to such a sepulchre. Someone, wishing to hide an unexpected death, had been there before him.

He glanced up to find Stasia's white face peering down at him.

"What is the matter?" she whispered. "Hurry, hurry. It is nearly two o'clock."

Nearly two! In four hours there

would be dawn. In three, that lightening of the sky, that stirring of human interests that precedes it. And disclosure, if Butterworth's body were not hidden by that time.

Gordon would have liked to laugh again—that grim, sardonic laugh that had startled Stasia back there in the halls of the gaunt building across the street.

It was a fine night for a murder; evidently someone had chosen this grave to hide his crime. To hide a crime that, as a good, law-abiding, God-fearing citizen, it was his duty to discover and punish.

But if he went any further, if he made an examination and revealed the victim of the unknown criminal, then where would he be? Where would Stasia of the million charms, the unfailing allure, be? Stasia, the mistress of his dreams.

He looked up into her white face still staring down at him. In its unusual position with the shadows of the willows cast on it, it looked distorted, almost ugly.

Stasia ugly! He could not bear that thought. He spoke to stifle it.

"Someone else," he whispered, "someone else—here—murdered, I suppose."

Then his voice rose louder, clearer. "We can't do it. We'll have to tell. We can't let this thing go. Some poor devil——"

"Some poor devil," repeated the white lips above him. "Don't you know? Don't you understand? It's Frank."

Stasia had reached her hand down and taken hold of his, else surely he would have fallen into the grave beside his friend. Ames—dead? Killed? By whom?

Stasia supplied that information. She was whimpering again, but with more assurance, with hope. Now that she had got the business so far it would soon be over, if only Gordon

could be made to understand. Then—they would be free.

The ugly marriage was over, the ugly liaison was finished; the rich widow and the man she had always loved could travel far and forget. All her dreams were in her pleading voice as she urged:

"Don't ask me now. Wait; let us finish what we came to do. I couldn't tell you before. I thought you wouldn't find him. Hurry, for God's sake. He's dead—you can't bring him back. Fred killed him."

Ames, his own friend—his pal at school. Fred's pal, dead by Fred's hand. And now Fred.

HIS BRAIN suddenly went black, his thinking process stopped; like a child he began to obey Stasia's instructions.

There was, she had said, nothing else to do. No use implicating themselves in crimes they had not committed. No use rousing scandal. For her sake—for her dear, dear sake.

Ames had no relatives. It would be long before anyone inquired for him. Butterworth had often threatened suicide. His disappearance would blow over.

Tomorrow a solemn funeral procession would terminate at that grave and the disposal of the corpse of a very old and very honorable man who wished to be buried among his forebears would set them free forever. Free to love each other!

Even as she helped him scramble to the surface, Gordon was conscious of noting how capable she was. If it had not been for her he would have muffed the disposal of this corpse. He would have raised a hue and cry about that other—Thing.

The dirt was neatly leveled over the two bodies lying side by side. It had not taken them so long to do it—that far-off clock was only chiming three. They had worked hard, for Stasia

thought it would be best to make the grave a little deeper.

With their own hands they turned the earth. With her own white and very little hands she had turned it. Gordon glanced at them and, seeing the soil of that dark, dank grime, he shuddered.

"We shall have to go back there," she whispered, "and wash up. Hurry. It's so early yet, no one will be about."

"Yes," acquiesced Gordon mechanically.

He was thinking how little he had known his friends. At least how little he had known Ames. If it had not been proven to him he would not have believed that Frank was the sort to steal another man's wife. But then, he had not known that Stasia was the sort to be stolen.

He looked at her more sharply. She was very small and white in the bright light of the electric street lamp they were passing.

In the dim building she looked gray and worn, like a ghost.

IN THE studio, she recovered her efficiency completely.

"We must put everything in order, as if nothing had happened," she ordered when the marks of their recent grim occupation had been removed.

"Yes," agreed Gordon.

Stasia looked at him curiously; he had uttered little but monosyllables, now that she thought about it, since he had arrived.

Poor Jack! He had an awful night!

First, to discover that she had been unfaithful even to her love for him! Then, that he should see Fred die in that horrible way, and then to realize that he must hide the body—only to find what had become of his friend, Frank Ames!

Enough to try even a war hero such as Jack! A terrible night for him. But he should forget it all in her

arms on the Riviera—as soon as But-terworth's estate was settled.

They re-hung the curtains, burned the blood-stained cushions in the fire-place, and melted the fragments of the Ming vase in the fire.

Stasia cut the blood-stained hem from her dress. It was too long, anyway, she said, and she had a light coat in Ames' closet with which she could conceal the jagged edge. The hem was thrown on the fire.

Long before the ashes were cold Gordon swept them up and threw them down the drain in the bathroom. As for the broken chair, he wiped it free of finger marks, and put it behind a screen. Anyone may have a broken chair.

They were through. They were safe! With the buoyancy natural to her, Stasia began to breathe freely; even to show an inclination to take the events of the night lightly.

"Now," she cried, throwing her arms wide, "we can go! The worst is over. We are free!"

GORDON crossed the room as if to take her in his arms; instead, he paused abruptly in front of her, looking into her eyes as if he were trying to find something. Stasia, astonished at first, began to whimper as before.

"What is the matter, Jack? What's the matter? What have I done?"

"That is what I want you to tell me," he answered. "What have you done? I want to know what you are—if you know yourself. I want the exact story of what happened here tonight."

"But I've told you," she exclaimed. "I came here. I thought Fred was going out of town. He told me so. I suppose he had suspected and was trying to trap me."

"I didn't realize that, so I came—and he came. And he was going to kill me. But Frank intervened—oh,

don't look like that at me, don't look like that at me!"

She was sobbing and looking about as if for a means of escape from Gordon's eyes. Finding none, she sank on the divan, burying her face in the pillows.

"Frank saved you from him," Gordon went on, "saved your life. You saw the knife coming; you shielded yourself. Was this after the struggle?"

"Oh, yes. He tried to choke me first. See, my neck is red a little yet. Frank got his hands away. And then——" She choked into silence.

"And then he drew the knife," said Gordon quietly. "But—it went to Frank's heart instead of yours."

He shuddered. "And then—then Fred knew that he had killed a man that he had called 'friend.' And then what happened? Who thought of the open grave?"

Gordon thundered the question at her as she lay there, sobbing into her ineffectual handkerchief, clutching the pillows with one little hand.

"I did, I did," she confessed, moving her body along the divan nearer to Gordon as he loomed over her, stern and furious.

"I had come early and met Frank. He was sketching the old caretaker in the graveyard. And the new grave fascinated me. I couldn't get it off my mind. And afterward, when all this happened, I thought of it."

"The caretaker told us that the grave would probably be closed again, as old Mr. Martin's family had decided to disobey his last wishes to be buried near his ancestors, and to place him in the new vault at Woodlawn."

"It all came back to me when I saw Fred standing there gibbering, horrified, realizing what he had done. I knew he hadn't meant to kill Frank. He had meant that knife for me. He had always said that it was the wo-

man in cases like this, and not her lover, that deserved to suffer. But—the knife was still there, and an ugly look was coming into his eyes.

"Oh, don't you see?" she cried, sobbing as though her whole body were involved. "I had to be his friend; I had to help him to save himself!"

"I reasoned with him, persuaded him to hide the body, to escape the consequences. I told him I understood that he hadn't meant it, and so I didn't think he ought to be punished. I begged him to save himself—after all, he wanted to. I told him what to do, showed him the grave from the window——"

"And then he was coming back from the task to take you home with him?" Gordon demanded.

"Yes," sobbed Stasia. "Don't you see how horrible that would have been? I would have had to refuse to go. And he would have killed me. I knew it!"

"But," objected Gordon, "his task took him some time. You could have called a taxi and got away before he returned."

"But I was trying to fix things up. You don't understand. There was the blood over everything, as well as on those things you burned. I washed it off. I looked for my letters and destroyed them. I knew all that had to be done. But I phoned for you first, so that when he would come back, if he did before I had finished, you would be here to protect me."

THERE was a pause. The woman crept along the wide divan until she reached one of Gordon's hands, hanging clenched at his side. Then she seized it suddenly and rained passionate kisses on it.

"Besides," she whispered, "I wanted you. I have never wanted anyone but you. All the rest—make-shifts! And tonight, at last, I could be free to be yours!"

"I wanted you to be here when Fred returned. I wanted to tell him the truth, to tell you the truth in front of him; to make him see that he had to let us go free, or we could inform the police of his guilt."

"But now his own guilty soul, startled at seeing you here, fearful of what I had said, has settled everything for us. And we are free, free at last! My darling, free to love each other."

"Yes," replied Gordon, releasing his hand gently. "We are free."

He looked about the room. "Where is your coat?" he asked quietly.

She jumped up from the divan, all her tears and fears vanishing at his gentler mood.

"Here," she cried, opening a closet door.

Gordon helped her into it, and noticed how carefully she fastened it down the front, so as to hide the jagged edge of her dress.

"We can walk to Broadway and find a night-prowling taxi there," she suggested. "I will go to mother's, of course, until everything is settled. But I must see you every day, every day, until then. It will make me nervous to lose sight of you for a moment."

Almost as soon they reached the thoroughfare that stretches from the Battery to Albany a lone taxi appeared, and Stasia gladly stepped into its dark interior.

Gordon gave the address to the chauffeur, and turned to Stasia.

"Good-by," he said, with a finality that could not be understood.

THE DOOR closed with a bang, and the taxi leaped forward; the chauffeur, anxious to get home after a long, late night, ignored the little hands beating on the glass, just as he felt the gentleman who walked away so decisively would have liked him to do.

As they passed on out of sight Stasia sank back upon the seat, staring ahead of her at rising ghosts.

Gordon turned deliberately and walked toward the cemetery; in the early morning light the open grave showed plainly. Without a tremor Gordon turned in at the little wooden gate and stood beside it, staring into its depths.

His best friend lay at the bottom there, well hidden—a false friend he had proven to be, for Ames knew better than any one how much he had adored Stasia.

And the other—a murderer! And once they had been friends, devoted friends. Together they had spent many happy hours. Together they would spend the rest of Time. Gordon took his hat from his head.

"Good morning, sir." The old

caretaker was at his elbow. "I suppose you was thinking that's a queer place for rich old Mr. Martin to be buried. But he ain't going to be, sir, for his family decided that he was too old when he died to know what he wanted, so he's going to the new vault in Woodlawn. And this here grave's to be closed at once, on orders of the Board of Health. At dawn, the order reads."

Two sturdy men with shovels appeared, even as the sun came pleasantly through the old willows. And Gordon, bowing his head, moved his lips silently while, with slow, deliberate movements, the grave-diggers lowered the earth upon the unseen dead.

The Plight of John McBride

By WILLIAM JAMES PRICE

They placed young John McBride behind the bars
The day he shot and killed Priscilla Drew;
But I, who viewed upon his body scars
Of phantom fingers, claim he never knew.

For months a demon had possessed the man.
He saw unearthly creatures in the night;
And once Priscilla's buried lover, Dan,
Through him had spoken, filling us with fright.

Dan claimed that she and John were playing fast,
And swore that he would get them bye and bye.
Maguire had hated both of them at last—
And hatred is not ended when we die.

McBride would often waken with a start,
And dressing quickly, walk the city ways.
Some power was driving him to play the part
Which terminated poor Priscilla's days.

Once I had seen behind him in the room
A ghostly semblance of the dead Maguire,
With large revolver glinting in the gloom
As though the phantom were about to fire.

Somehow Maguire had worked upon the mind
And broken down his weaker rival's will.
And yet, what jury in the world would find
The dead man forced the living man to kill?

Yes, John McBride will tread the air in time,
And so fulfill the jealous lover's boast;
For though Maguire is guilty of the crime,
It would be rather hard to hang a ghost!

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